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Football condition in China: the case of naturalized players

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Abstract

The focus of this thesis is the recent naturalization of foreign players in China, that led to the debut of the first football player without Chinese ancestry in the Chinese national team.

The first chapter is an introduction to the naturalization in football in all its aspects. I will first clarify concepts such as nation, nationality, and citizenship. Then I will analyze the evolution of the regulations on eligibility, starting from the case of Italy in the thirties to arrive to the modern FIFA eligibility rules.

In the second chapter, I will focus on the Chinese football condition. Starting with an overview of football history in the country, from the very first form of the game passing through the professionalization in the nineties to arrive at the recent years in which the Chinese Super League (CSL) developed very rapidly. The focus of the chapter is the relationship between Chinese authorities, football clubs and players and the reforms Chinese government is doing to reduce the gap with European football, trying to improve both CSL clubs and national team level. These reforms aim to turn China into a world elite competitor by 2050 mainly through promotion of football at the grassroots level and league development.

The third chapter reviews the process of naturalization of foreign players that is now a widespread argument in the Chinese football circle, investigating reasons, advantages and drawbacks. For this analysis I based myself on the document “Chinese Football Association provisional regulations on the administration of the naturalized players”, which I translated. The document stipulates rules governing the registration and transfer of players who have recently obtained Chinese nationality or are in the process of doing so.

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前言

本论文的中文题目是《中国足球的状况：入籍球员的案例》。

三十年以来，中国足球经历了巨大的变化。与欧洲或南美洲足球相比，中国足球只是在九十年代才开始职业化，从那时起，中国足球的歌相关部门，都急不可待地尝试与世界上最重要的联赛和国家队的建立联系以获取所需。经过多年的调研，1994年成立了中国历史上第一个职业足球联赛，但是直到2009年中国足球联赛一直是腐败的受害者，这导致它在2004年进行了改革（当时以中国超级联赛的名字命名，以下建成“中超”）。十年以来，中国足球的进步非常惊讶，许多高级外国球员加入了中超，比赛的传播范围也扩大了。十年前，加盟中国足球俱乐部的外国球员都是在欧洲没有经验的南美球员，或职业生涯几乎结束的前传奇球员，但是最近，许多欧洲重量级球员决定转战中国继续他们的职业生涯。

尽管如此，从足球职业化以来，中国足球的主要目标一直是提高国家队的水平，以便进入世界杯决赛为中国带来争得国际荣誉。然而至今，中国国家队只参加了2002年韩日世界杯，但是无法通过小组赛，也没取得一粒进球。所以，习近平当选中华人民共和国主席后决定足球发展成了一项重要政策，他希望2050年中国能够成为世界足球强国，其实习主席的“中国足球梦”包括三个愿望：中国国家队再世界杯出线、举办世界杯决赛阶段比赛及获得世界杯冠军。为了实现他的愿望及加速中国足球的发展，在2015年国务院印发了《中国足球改革发展总体方案》（以下简称《方案》）。《方案》中提到的最重要的创新是中国足球协会与体育总局的脱钩；意识到发展个水平、各年龄联赛的重要性；将足球发展正式作为国家战略的一部分。习近平推动中国足球发展的决心也与“软实力”的概念有关。习近平希望通过足球的发展，要在国际舞台上增强中国的影响力，为此许多中国投资者进入了欧洲足球市场，而政府本身就将足球事业纳入了“一带一路”倡议。

《方案》印发五年后，虽然中国足球联赛的水平略有提高，但是国家队的成绩还很差。因此，为了有机会参加2022年卡塔尔世界杯，中国足球协会决定实行归化入籍球员的战略。归化外籍球员的过程、特征、基点与实施策略是本文的焦点。因为历史上中国没有短时间集中大规模移民的先例，所以归化外籍球员堪称中国

足球的伟大转折点。中超的最新历史表明没有高级的外国球员的贡献，就很难取得圆满的结果，为此需要通过球员的技术移民，来刺激国家队。2019年3月28日，中国足协又印发了《中国足球协会入籍球员管理暂行规定》，完善了足球归化计划的相关规制，特别是相关归化球员的管理和联赛注册。作者把这篇规定翻译成英文并进行了分析。2019年5月28日中国足球正式开启了“归化时代”。那时北京国安俱乐部的归化球员李可入选国足大名单，成为中国足球史上第一位归化球员。此后，中国足球扩大了归化球员的考察范畴。2019年8月21日，广州恒大俱乐部的归化球员艾克森入选国足大名单，成为首位无血缘归化球员。

为了更好地理解中国的入籍过程，还必须分析入籍概念在欧洲足球中如何发展，研究归化的法律依据也很重要。虽然一个国家可以根据其法律向球员提供公民身份（在中国有《中华人民共和国国籍法》），但是为了正式代表国家队，球员必须遵守《国际足联章程》的国际足联资格规则。

本论文的目标是给读者提供中国足球发展的概观，使读者了解中国足球相关部门如何实行入籍球员的战略。为了写这篇论文，作者查阅不同的信息来源，包括新闻，文章、书籍、访谈、官方规定和官方政府文件。分析信息来源的主要语言是英文和中文，尤其是第三章。此外，作者查阅了所有可检索的原始信息来源，并通过实际案例研究解释了相关理论主题。

本论文分为三章。

第一章指是对足球归化各个方面的介绍。首先，本章将明确国家，国籍，公民身份，入籍等概念。其次，通过提供实际案例研究来分析有关资格法规的变化。

在第二章中，研究的重点转移到中国足球的状况和发展。从中国足球的历史开始，再到近年来中超的快速发展。本章的重点是中国政府、中国足球管理部门、足球俱乐部和球员之间的关系，以及中国政府为缩小与欧洲足球差距所做的改革。习近平的愿望是，通过改革基层足球，到2050年可以使中国成为世界足坛的一流竞争者。此外，习主席的目标是将足球发展作为一种“软实力”工具，以提高中国在全球舞台上的形象。

第三章通过对动机、优点和缺点的研究，分析中国归化外籍球员的过程。本章考察从开始阶段到现在的入籍过程，目前已达到十一个，说明其动机以及球员、

足球俱乐部和足球管理部门面临的挑战。此外，作者翻译并分析了中国足球协会印发的《中国足球协会入籍球员管理暂行规定》。该规定适用于在办理入籍手续或已完成入籍手续球员的注册和管理。

Introduction

In the last thirty years, Chinese football has undergone numerous changes. Compared to Europe or South America, football in China has been professionalized only in the nineties and since then the authorities have been eager to bridge the gap with the world's most important leagues and national teams, without considering the time required and trying to obtain immediate results no matter what. After many years of investigation, in 1994 was launched the first professional football league in China's history, with sponsorship supporting both the clubs and the league itself. However, until 2009 the Chinese league has been victim of corruption and bribing, which caused its reform in 2004 (when it assumed the name of Chinese Super League) and the risk of collapse immediately afterwards. In the last ten years though, the progresses have been surprising: many high-level foreign players entered the league and the broadcasting of the matches has expanded its range. In the first half of the decade, the foreign players joining the league were mostly South American players with no experience in Europe, such as Conca or Elkeson, or former legends at the end of their careers, like Anelka, Drogba or Gilardino. However, in the last five years, many players at the peak of their careers in Europe, decided to move to China to continue playing, tempted mainly by the sumptuous salaries offered by Chinese clubs, like in the cases of Oscar, Hulk or Witsel. In order to stop this reckless spending spree, Chinese football authorities have decided to issue multiple regulations which, however, seem to be confusing and extremely restrictive. For what regards broadcasting, in the last few years China's football has a higher degree of marketization and commercialization, a wide range of live broadcasts, and a high degree of attention in the global football market. As of 2018 in fact, ninety-six countries around the world have purchased the broadcast rights of the CSL, which is an incredibly high amount if we consider that not so long ago Chinese football was unfamiliar to most football fans around the world.

Nevertheless, the main aim of Chinese football in all these years has been improving the level of the national team and qualify for a World Cup, event that would bring prestige to the country. Although in 2002 China succeeded to qualify, it must be said that the qualifiers were easier than the other years due to the absence of the two best Far East teams, Japan and South Korea, who were automatically qualified as hosts of the event. Although this qualification should have represented a new starting point for Chinese football, due to the absence of any kind of planning and of qualified policymakers, the

situation did not improve at all. In fact, institutions in China sought for the fastest way to enhance the performance level, without considering any long-term planning starting from youth football promotion and infrastructure development.

After Xi Jinping had been appointed President of the People's Republic of China in 2013, the development of football became a priority of his program. His main wish is to make China a top team in Asia by 2030 and a world competitor by 2050, besides hosting and winning the World Cup in the near future. To fulfill this objectives, in 2015 the ambitious "Overall plan for Chinese football reform and development" (中国足球改革发展总体方案, *Zhōngguó zúqiú gǎigé fāzhǎn zǒngtǐ fāng'àn*) was launched. The most important innovations introduced with the Reform Plan were the decoupling of the Chinese Football Association from the General Administration of Sports, which is a state institution, and consequently the separation between the state and football authorities; the recognition of the importance of developing football at all levels; and that football development is prioritized as part of a national strategy. However, there is still a certain level of perplexity about which will be the future role of the party-state in the process of development of Chinese football. At the moment, it is unlikely to think of a future in which the government will completely retreat from the football industry. Xi Jinping's determination to enhance the level of Chinese football in order to elevate China at the level of the world's best teams, is also related to the so-called "Chinese Dream" (中国梦, *Zhōngguó mèng*) and "soft-power". Through football, Xi Jinping aims to reaffirm China's power in the global context by becoming an attractive and model country. In the pursuing of this target, many Chinese investors are entering European football clubs and the state itself has put football in its Belt and Road Initiative.

This desire of a stronger China in football to give a positive image in the international context, has brought Chinese authorities to invest money and resources. However, to this day, the reform brought little effects, such as an increase of football fields around Chinese cities and a significant improvement of the league's level, but the national team is still striving for success. For this reason, the last attempt to obtain the qualification for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar is the naturalization of foreign football players, which is the main focus of this research work. The naturalization of football players has been an epochal turning point for Chinese football as China as a country historically does not have the natural conditions for extensive naturalization of foreigners, as there is no such thing as large-scale immigration. The reluctance of China towards foreign players can also be seen from the limitations on the number of foreigners in the CSL to give more space to

domestic players. However, the recent history of Chinese football has proved that, without the contribution of high-level foreign players, it is hard to obtain satisfactory results, as they are more experienced and skilled to lead the teams to achieve better results. In addition their presence enhances the level of domestic players and stimulate them to improve. This strategy was definitively adopted for the national team when the English-born with Chinese origin Nico Yennaris made his debut with *The Dragons* in a friendly match against Philippines on June 7, 2019, followed on September 10 by Elkeson, the first naturalized player without Chinese ancestors ever to play for the national team. On March 2019 were published the first regulations about the registration and the management of naturalized players in China, which were amended on December to avoid the clubs' abuse of naturalized players in their rosters. The reader can find the original document issued on March in the Appendix of this thesis, together with a translation made by the author.

To better comprehend the process of naturalization in China, it is necessary to analyze also how the concept of naturalization has developed in European football, which has developed much earlier than Asian football, and subsequently has expanded worldwide. Furthermore, it is important also to study the legal foundation of the naturalization. FIFA in fact leaves the issues about naturalization to the countries, but regulates the eligibility of players for its member associations. In fact if a football player wants to change its association and represent another country at the international level, he must present a formal request to the football's governing body and wait for the approval. This means that, although a country can guarantee to a football player the citizenship according to its national laws, to represent the national team of that country the player must obligatorily comply with FIFA eligibility rules.

The purpose of this study is to provide the reader with a presentation of the essential steps of Chinese football development which later led to the decision to adopt the naturalization strategy. The main topics are discussed by means of a combination of an historical and a journalistic approach, presenting the facts in a chronological order and analyzing the different behaviors of Chinese authorities when dealing with football development. This work is the result of the crossing of different sources of information, which include press articles, biographies, essays, books, interviews as well as official regulations. The analyzed sources are mainly in English and, especially for the third chapter, in Chinese. Furthermore, I consulted the original source of any retrievable document and I explained any theoretical topic with practical case studies.

The present thesis is divided in three chapters.

The first chapter is an introduction to the naturalization in football in all its aspects. The chapter will first clarify concepts such as nation, nationality, citizenship and naturalization. Afterwards, the evolution of the regulations on eligibility will be analyzed by providing practical case studies. The starting point of the analysis is the case of the Italian *rimpatriati* in the thirties, who could easily restore their nationality as they were considered Italian citizens born and resident abroad. Many cases of nationality switch continued until the 1962 when the first FIFA eligibility rules, which prevented a player from representing two different national teams in official competitions, were first issued. Due to the relative ease with which a player could still change its association and represent a national team different from his native country without having any connection with the adoptive country, in 2004 were issued the modern FIFA eligibility rules. The eligibility rules have not changed after the last amendment in 2009, and are still in force at the present moment.

In the second chapter, the focus of the work will shift on the condition and development of Chinese football. Starting with an overview of the history of football in the country, from the very first form of the game, passing through the professionalization in the nineties, to arrive at the recent years in which the Chinese Super League (CSL) has developed at an incredibly fast pace. The focus of the chapter is the relationship between Chinese authorities, football clubs and players and the reforms Chinese government is doing to reduce the gap with European football, trying to improve both the CSL clubs and the national team's level. The desire of Xi Jinping is that these reforms can turn China into a world elite competitor by 2050 through promotion of football at the grassroots level. Furthermore, the president's aim is to use football development as a "soft-power" tool to increase China's image in the global arena is also analyzed.

The third chapter analyzes the process of naturalization of foreign players in China, investigating motivations, advantages, and drawbacks. The chapter examines the process from its starting phase to the last naturalizations, which have now reached a grand total of eleven, explaining the motivations behind it and the challenges encountered by the clubs, the players, and the authorities. Furthermore, the author translated and analyzed the document "Chinese Football Association temporary regulations on the administration of the naturalized players", which stipulates rules governing the registration and the management of players who have recently obtained Chinese nationality or are in the process of doing so.

Chapter 1

The relationship between citizenship and football

1.1 The concepts of nation, citizenship, and naturalization

Due to the global features of football, to correctly analyze the circumstances under which naturalization occurs, it is useful to clarify some concepts such as nation, nationality, and citizenship. First, it is important to note that the concept of nation is related to the concept of state. The state is the set of institutions that governs a given territory and its people by regulating their political, economic, and social interactions. This set of institutions includes a large variety of things such as the police and the military, the judicial and educational systems, the parliament and the executive branch, as well as tax collectors, firefighters, and diplomats. All these public institutions maintain order within a society through the enforcement of laws and norms. The concept of nation instead is more difficult to define because there is few consensus among the scholars about what exactly it is. According to Steiner, a nation is a community that controls or seeks to control its own state, by forming a relationship between the members of the community and the institutions that control them. The members of this community feel connected to each other for many different reasons which include language, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, geographic proximity, common history, shared moral values. In any case, just sharing such characteristics does not necessarily mean that every member of a community is bonded and wants to be a part of it. In this conception, nations have many points in common with ethnic groups, except for a critical difference: nations seek to build their own state while ethnic groups are content to live under the existing state, like for example Chinatown in New York.¹

Nationalism as well is a vague term; it refers both to an ideology and a behavior. According to one of the most important academics about nationalism and ethnicity James Kellas: «the ideology of nationalism builds on people's awareness of a nation to give a set of attitudes and a programme of action. Nationalism seek to defend and promote the

¹ Steiner N., *International migration and citizenship today*, Routledge, New York and London, 2009, pp. 91-93.

interests of the nation. [...] seek a political expression for the nation, most strongly in independent statehood». As a form of political behavior, nationalism is related to the concept of patriotism and is based on the feeling of belonging to a community, namely the nation.² Generally speaking, nationalism can be considered as the principle according to which the nation and the state should be congruent, thereby creating a nation-state. As a matter of fact, national identity not only bonds a nation together, but it also builds and maintains the nation's loyalty to the state, which, for its part, invests in different activities to foster this loyalty. Such loyalty is crucial for stability in the nation-state, because when a nation's loyalty to the state is not properly established or begins to be lacking, nationalist conflicts and civil wars often occur.³

Nationality instead, is defined in the Art. 2 of the European Convention on Nationality as the legal bond between a person and a State and does not indicate the person's ethnic origin.⁴ In other words, nationality is a legal concept and not a sociological or ethnical concept. The nationality in this legal sense is acquired or lost on the basis of a nationality statute issued by a given country. It is both in international and in national law an important connecting factor for the attribution of rights and duties to individual persons and States. It is difficult to distinguish the concepts of nationality and citizenship. According to de Groot, nationality expresses a person's legal bond with a particular State, while citizenship implies, among others, enabling an individual to actively participate in the constitutional life of that State. Usually, the recognition of citizenship rights and nationality coincide in practice. However, not everyone who possesses the nationality of a particular State also enjoys full citizenship rights: an example are small children who may possess the nationality of a State, but they are not yet allowed to exercise citizenship rights. The opposite as well is true: in some countries, for example, subject to certain conditions non-nationals are permitted to vote and be elected in local elections.⁵

Citizenship is a term that has not a unique definition accepted by every scholar; it means different things to many different people. In the definition of Steiner, citizenship

² Kellas J.G., *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, New York, Macmillan Education, 1991, pp. 3-4.

³ Steiner N., *op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁴ "European Convention on Nationality", issued by the Council of Europe in Strasbourg on November 6, 1997.

⁵ de Groot G.R., "Sporting Nationality: Remarks on the Relationship Between the General Legal Nationality of a Person and his 'Sporting Nationality'", *The International Sports Law Journal*, No. 1-2, 2006, p. 3.

refers to the relationship between the individual and the state with regard to rights and duties. The state grants citizens certain rights, and in return citizens carry out certain duties.⁶ A classical view on citizenship is the one of British sociologist T.H. Marshall, from whom many academics took inspiration. In his essay *Citizenship and Social Class* written in 1949, he divided citizenship into three elements – civil, political, and social rights. These are three types of rights that the individual gained from the state over time. First came civil rights in the eighteenth century, which gave individuals rights such as the freedom to practice a religion, express thoughts, own property, and enjoy equality before the law. The nineteenth century then gave citizens additional political rights, such as the right to vote and to participate in politics by serving in governing bodies that makes laws. Finally, the twentieth century gave citizens social rights to certain economic and social welfare standards. This expansion of rights over time has consequently expanded the definition of who is a citizen.⁷ In order to support citizens' rights, the state must create institutions functioning according to clear and fair laws, and which must also ensure that citizens carry out their duties by offering incentives and punishments. These rights and duties are enclosed in a legal framework, and we can therefore think of them as offering *legal citizenship*. In this form of citizenship, it is rather clear who is and who is not a citizen. Nevertheless, many scholars argue that citizens must also possess a sense of sympathy toward their fellow citizens and of belonging toward the state. This form of citizenship we can call *identity citizenship*. It is important to note that there is not always a perfect overlap between legal and identity citizenship, though.⁸ Over the years, due to the technological advance which remarkably shortened the distances, international migration has intensified and considerations on who to admit and on who should receive citizenship in a country are now commonplace. The issuance of citizenship is important because it brings with it a multitude of rights, duties, benefits, obligations, burdens, and privileges between individuals and states.⁹

The vast majority of the world's people acquire citizenship as a result of the circumstances into which they were born. Individuals, in the moment they are born, receive citizenship on the basis either of being born in a certain country (*Jus soli*) or being

⁶ Steiner N., *op. cit.*, pp. 97-98.

⁷ Marshall T.H., *Citizenship and Social Class*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1949, in Manza J., Sauder M. (ed. by), *Inequality and Society: Social Science Perspectives on Social Stratification*, Norton, New York, 2009, pp. 148-154.

⁸ Steiner N., *op. cit.*, p. 97.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 105.

a descendent of a citizen of a certain country (*Jus sanguini*). For example, the United Kingdom and Ireland traditionally applied *jus soli* and so did traditional immigration countries like the United States, or most countries of Latin America. Italy or Germany on the other hand traditionally applied *jus sanguini*. Nowadays, most countries do not apply either *jus sanguinis* or *jus soli*, but a combination of both principles.¹⁰ Although most of the people in the world have their citizenship because of the circumstances of their birth, some other people, choose to gain the citizenship of a country later in life through a process called naturalization. In the current global panorama, it is important to define who counts as a migrant in order to explain the acquisition of citizenship. First of all it is important to say that it does not exist a single definition of the term because states use different criteria to define migrants within their national policies around migration, nationality and naturalization. However, in studies on international migration, is commonly defined as a migrant a person who has a mismatch between the country of birth and the country of residence. This approach, however, is the most simplistic one and it ignores important complexities related to citizenship and nationality, and it uses the current international boundaries as a reference to an individual's place of birth.¹¹ There is a wide range of requirements that states establish to become a naturalized citizen. In some cases, the threshold is quite low, while in others the process is quite laborious. One common expectation of foreigners who want to become citizens is that they adapt to the culture of the host society.¹² For example, there is a principle to acquire citizenship, called *jus nexi*, that emerged due to increased global mobility. *Jus nexi* refers to the principle according to which people who have been residing and contributing to the economic and social welfare of a state can become, after a given period of time, eligible to apply for legal citizenship of the state, entering the process of naturalization.¹³ The concept of citizen assumed value with nationalists movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mostly in terms of exclusivity. In this context indeed, immigrants and dual nationals were seen as disloyal or potentially disloyal to the nation, because, as seen above, being a citizen meant loyalty to one nation-state. For this reason, until the late eighties of

¹⁰ de Groot G.R., *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹¹ van Campenhout G., van Sterkenburg J., Oonk G., "Who Counts as a Migrant Footballer? A Critical Reflection and Alternative Approach to Migrant Football Players on National Teams at the World Cup, 1930–2018", *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 35 No. 11, 2018, p. 1072.

¹² Steiner N., *op. cit.*, p. 109.

¹³ Shachar A., "Earned citizenship: property lessons for immigration reform", *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities*, 2010, pp. 6-9.

the twentieth century when states around the world began to finally recognize the legality of dual citizenship, dual nationals were seen with fear and were the justification for anti-immigrants actions.¹⁴

1.2 Football and citizenship

Since its birth, the game of football has had a strong international component, moving players and clubs all over the world, but it has as well a local component, as it intensifies the reaffirmation of a national identity. Mass sports in fact, and especially football as the world's most famous sport, reflect the popular form of nationalist behavior, where masses of people become highly emotional in support of their national team.¹⁵ As Giulianotti and Finn assert: «sport is one of the key mediums within popular culture that can be used in an attempt to produce and reproduce senses of national identity. [...] football has provided the most important setting within popular culture in which symbols and discourses of national identity may be displayed and mediated through mass communication».¹⁶ By 1904, the sudden growth of the game internationally led to the establishment of a new global body, the FIFA¹⁷, to regulate the game. After the end of World War I, men's national teams began to play international matches consistently, hence in 1930 FIFA

¹⁴ Bohland J.D., *Who Counts as a Real American? Dual Citizenship, Hybridity, and the U.S. Men's National Team*, in Elsey B., Pugliese S.G. (ed. by), *Football and the Boundaries of History: Critical Studies in Soccer*, Hempstead (New York), Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 180-181.

¹⁵ Kellas J.G., *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁶ Giulianotti R., Finn G.P.T., "Old visions, old issues: New horizons, new openings? Change, continuity and other contradictions in world football", *Sport in Society*, Vol. 2 No. 3, 1999, p. 257.

¹⁷ The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) was founded in the headquarters of the Union Française de Sports Athlétiques (USFSA) in Paris on 21 May 1904. The foundation act was signed by the authorized representatives of the associations of France, Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and by a representative of Madrid Football Club on behalf of Spain. The first FIFA Statutes were drafted and the following points were determined: the reciprocal and exclusive recognition of the national associations represented and attending; clubs and players were forbidden to play simultaneously for different national associations; recognition by the other associations of a player's suspension announced by an association; and the playing of matches according to the Laws of the Game of the Football Association. This Statutes of FIFA were only of a provisional nature, in order to simplify the acceptance of additional members. On the day of foundation, the German FA confirmed that it would adhere to these Statutes in principle. <https://www.fifa.com/news/history-fifa-foundation-447>

decided to organize the first World Cup tournament, event that marks the definitive internationalization of the game. Since then, national team football matches soon became among the world's most viewed and followed sporting events.¹⁸ With the increasing popularity of the game, footballers started to migrate seeking for the best opportunities, and this migration led also to the first nationality switches in football. Speaking about migration in football, Lanfranchi and Taylor, who studied the international migration of professional football players from an historical perspective, divide migrant footballers into three different categories: the "itinerant" footballers are players spending one or two years in a foreign league before returning to their previous countries; the football "mercenaries" change country as soon as they get a better offer; and in the end the "settlers", which find a home and a partner in the host country and spend the rest of their life there. The last kind of players are symbolic of the potential of football to act as a means of integration for immigrants. Not all cases fit neatly into this categorization, though. Many players at the end of their careers for example, decide to move abroad in order to reduce the stress of competitive leagues and earn some money in rich countries.¹⁹

Nationality switches in international sports can be traced back to the ancient Greeks. In fact, while at first the participation to the Olympic Games was restricted to free Greeks, later Romans, Egyptians, and other foreigners could compete as well. In addition, it was common for the best athletes to trade their talent to the city-state which offered more money, as Greek politicians saw sport as a successful means of legitimizing their power.²⁰ Since the very first years of the twentieth century the football players' geographical movements and their regulation was a major concern for the football authorities. An exchange of letters between two founding fathers of the FIFA, Robert Guérin and Carl A. Hirschman, shows that they were concerned to prevent that individual players or local clubs and associations could play simultaneously and in the same year in different national federations. For this reason, in the first FIFA Statutes it was specified that clubs and players were forbidden to play simultaneously for different national associations.²¹ Anyway, when sporting events started to become more popular, more competitive, and thus more

¹⁸ Bohland J.D., *op. cit.*, p. 182.

¹⁹ Lanfranchi P., Taylor M., *Moving with the Ball: The Migration of Professional Footballers*, Oxford-New York, Berg, 2001, p. 6.

²⁰ Hardman A.R., Iorwerth H., "Sport, Patriotism, and the Olympic Games", in Reid H.L., Austin M.W. (ed. by), *The Olympics and Philosophy*, Lexington (Kentucky), University Press of Kentucky, 2012, p. 56.

²¹ Dietschy P., "Football Players' Migrations: a Political Stake", *Historical Social Research*, Vol. 31 No. 1, 2006, p. 31.

lucrative, the eligibility of players became a major issue. Speaking of national identities in football, Mercer and Hague affirmed: «Global migration, geopolitics, refugee status, naturalization, and the increasing complexities of parental and grand-parental antecedents of players under consideration for national teams have rendered players' nationalities pliable». For this reason, football federations around the world often act like clubs, searching for the best talent who may have the requirements to be eligible for the national selection under FIFA regulations.²²

1.2.1 The Italian *rimpatriati*

FIFA eligibility rules though, have been quite unclear during the twentieth century. Initially FIFA allowed players with multiple citizenship to play at a senior level for more than one national team, as long as they completed the naturalization process. In fact, country exchange was a common practice until the 1960s, when FIFA changed its laws to bring an end to this phenomenon. Some of the most famous examples include the *oriundi*, who are South Americans with Italian origin who grew up in and played for their native countries before being bought by Italian clubs and representing Italy because of their dual nationality.²³ Nevertheless the term *oriundi* did not appear until the 1950s when the Italian Football League introduced a rule which stated that: «Every team can have a maximum of three players from foreign associations. These must include the *oriundi* as well as the foreigners».²⁴ Conversely, all the South Americans players who came to Europe in the 1920s and 1930s were known in Italy as the *rimpatriati*, literally “the repatriated”. Unlike the *oriundi*, with whom they are often confused, these migrants had no need to become Italian or reclaim their European nationality as they were legally dual citizens. In Fascist Italy in fact, prevailed the *jus sanguini* and the Art. 7 of the national law no. 555 of 1912 on citizenship said: «Except in the case of special provisions to be stipulated by international treaties, an Italian citizen born and residing in a foreign nation, which considers him to be a citizen of its own by birth, still retains Italian citizenship, but

²² Mercer J., Hague E., *op. cit.*, p. 8.

²³ Dart J., “Players who have been capped by more than one country”, *The Guardian*, 5 Apr. 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2006/apr/05/theknowledge.sport>

²⁴ Lanfranchi P., Taylor M., 2001, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-91.

he may abandon it when he becomes of age or emancipated».²⁵ By considering the *rimpatriati* as Italians who happened to be born in another country, was easy for them to immediately obtain the citizenship also in a country extremely xenophobe as the Italy of Benito Mussolini where foreign players were not admitted in the league. It was a compromise between clubs and the government in order to improve both the level of the clubs and of the national team.²⁶ Julio Libonatti became the first major Argentinian player to move to Italy when he signed for Torino in 1925. Libonatti was born in Rosario from a poor Italian immigrant family originating from Genoa and for this reason he immediately received an Italian passport. At the time he moved to Italy he already had fifteen caps with Argentina, to which he added a further seventeen with the Italian national team.²⁷ Many other players followed Libonatti, and their mass arrival was seen as a factor in improving the quality of the national team. In fact, in 1934 World Cup the Italian coach Vittorio Pozzo did not hesitate to make use of *rimpatriati*: “If they can die for Italy, they can play for Italy!”, Pozzo proclaimed, meaning that they were subject to military call-up. As a matter of fact, Italy’s winning team had three fundamental Argentinians: Luisito Monti, the attacking centre-half who had also played for Argentina in the 1930 World Cup final and who is the only player in history to have played two World Cup finals with two different teams; Enrique Guaita, the right winger; and Raimondo Orsi, who even scored in the final, on the left.²⁸ Interestingly, the fascist regime did not accentuate their role in the victory: none of them, for instance, received the decoration for sporting merit from the Duce, who instead chose Meazza, Allemandi and Ferrari, considered more representative of the qualities dear to him. Just a year after the victorious World Cup, Guaita together with his Roma teammates Scopelli and Stagnaro, left Italy and returned to South America to avoid taking part in the Ethiopian War.²⁹ Play yes, die no. They were heavily criticized by the Italian press and even accused of having illegally exported gold and money. After this episode, the number of Argentinian players in Italy diminished considerably. From the thirty-one under contract on September 1, 1935, there were only eleven a year later.³⁰ Although Argentinian players

²⁵ “Legge no. 555 sulla cittadinanza italiana”, enacted on Jun. 13, 1912.

²⁶ A similar situation happened with the case of naturalizations in China analyzed in Chapter 3.

²⁷ Lanfranchi P., Taylor M., 2001, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-76.

²⁸ Glanville B., *The Story of the World Cup: The Essential Companion to Russia 2018*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 14.

²⁹ In any case, due to their privileged status of football stars, their call-up was unlikely.

³⁰ Lanfranchi P., Taylor M., 2001, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-81.

were the most successful, along with them arrived in Italy Brazilian and Uruguayan players as well, all of them with Italian origin. Between 1929 and 1943, along with sixty Argentinian players, were registered twenty-six Brazilian footballers and thirty-two from Uruguay. In the league, *rimpatriati* were extremely required by many teams. In 1933 for example, at the peak of the Brazilian emigration, Lazio, recruited twelve Italo-Brazilians, including the coach Amilcar Barbuy. The team was known as *Brasilazio*. Nevertheless, as we can see from Table 1, Brazilian-born footballers played only a marginal role in the national team compared with that of the Argentines. This can be explained first of all by

Players	Country of Origin	Caps with Italy	Main Honors
Orsi	Argentina	35	World Cup 1934
Andreolo	Uruguay	26	World Cup 1938
Monti	Argentina	18	World Cup 1934
Libonatti	Argentina	17	Central European Cup 1927/28
Demaria	Argentina	13	World Cup 1934
Cesarini	Argentina	11	Central European Cup 1931/32
Guaita	Argentina	10	World Cup 1934
Guarisi	Brazil	6	World Cup 1934
Faccio	Uruguay	5	
Sansone	Uruguay	3	Central European Cup 1931/32
Fedullo	Uruguay	2	
Mascheroni	Uruguay	2	
O. Fantoni	Brazil	1	
Puricelli	Uruguay	1	
Scopelli	Argentina	1	

Table 1 Contribution of the rimpatriati to the Italian National Team, 1929–43

the recurring problem of the *saudade*, or homesickness, suffered particularly by Brazilians transferred to Europe. The Italian winter, although is not as cold as the northern European one, represented a particularly difficult period for those migrants. The second reason for the marginalization of the Brazilians was the difficulty they experienced integrating into Italian society. They were accused of making little effort to speak Italian, which led to increased tensions. For this reason, club directors and supporters were skeptical of the real identity and quality of these Brazilian players, introduced at first as champions and in most cases turned out to be nothing more than mediocre players.

Moreover, there was as well the suspicion that certain players lied about their name and hence about their Italian origin in order to obtain the citizenship. The number of Italo-Brazilians in the league started to decrease after 1936 and by 1941, when Brazil entered the war on the side of the allies, the few remaining were expelled from Italian football. On the contrary, most of the Uruguayans settled in Italy and remained in the peninsula after their careers, including the most successful of all, Michele Andreolo (born Miguel Ángel Andreolo Frodella), who won four league titles with Bologna and who was the only *rimpatriato* to win the 1938 World Cup with Italy. All these migrants were not only contributory in the development of club football, but also strongly influenced the national team and initiated a tradition still alive nowadays. Although the Italian experience may have been unique, many South Americans with European origin can also be found in France and Spain during the 1930s.³¹

1.2.2 The *oriundi* and the Spanish naturalizations

Since World War II, almost all domestic competitions have applied restrictions on foreign players. In Italy for example, after the end of the Fascist regime, were allowed a maximum of five players from foreign associations, three of whom could be foreign citizens. As mentioned above, in March 1949, the number of players from foreign associations was reduced to three, including both foreigners and *oriundi*. For the first time, these South American players were classified for the registration in the league along with foreign players rather than Italians. Although regulations alternated between defining them as foreigners and Italians for the following two decades, footballers in the Italian League were now effectively divided into three distinct categories: nationals, *oriundi* and foreigners. Many of these *oriundi* had a long and successful career in Italy. Among them, it is important to mention the Argentinian Omar Sívori, Antonio Angelillo and Humberto Maschio, as well as the Brazilian José Altafini. The three Argentinian central forwards stepped into the limelight during the 1957 South American Championship (current Copa América) in Perú in which they scored twenty goals in six matches, leading Argentina to the final victory. All in their early twenties at the time, they came from the popular suburbs of Buenos Aires and were considered as football's "bad boys", for this reason

³¹ *Ibid*, pp. 81-86.

they were nicknamed by the press “The Angels with Dirty Faces” after the Hollywood movie. That team was extremely promising and was widely expected to repeat this success in the World Cup in Sweden a year later.³² Unfortunately for Argentina, all three had by then left for Italy where they immediately received Italian citizenship.³³ This transfer riled deeply the pride of the Argentine football association that, although the three of them still could play in the team due to their dual nationality, they decided to ban them from playing for the national side, a decision that severely weakened performance of the national team in the 1958 World Cup. All of them ended up playing with the Italian national team and also thanks to his Italian citizenship, Sívori won the European Footballer of the Year³⁴ in 1961.³⁵ In those years, another important *oriundo* was Altafini. He, playing as Mazzola due to his resemblance with Valentino Mazzola, was a member of the Brazil team that won the 1958 FIFA World Cup in Sweden. Following the World Cup, Altafini began his career in Italy with A.C. Milan, and he immediately obtained the Italian citizenship which allowed him to play with the national team.³⁶ Remembering his decision to play for Italy he said: “It was very simple, back then Brazil never called on players who were based overseas. I was only 23 or 24 and I would have been devastated at missing a World Cup. It was not me who left Brazil. It was Brazil that left me”.³⁷ Altafini together with Sívori and Maschio were part of the Italian national team during the unfortunate expedition in Chile for the 1962 World Cup in which Italy did not even pass the first round. A huge controversy followed this World Cup since the Italian press and fans blamed mainly the *oriundi* for the weak performance of the national team, accusing them of laziness and carelessness about their host country. Especially Altafini was treated as the scapegoat and criticized throughout the tournament for avoiding

³² *Ibid*, pp. 90-93.

³³ Sívori went to Juventus, Angelillo to Inter and Maschio to Bologna.

³⁴ The Ballon d’Or was originally an award only for players from Europe and widely known as the European Footballer of the Year award. In 1995, the Ballon d’Or was expanded to include all players from any origin that have been active at European clubs. The award became a global prize in 2007 with all professional footballers from around the world being eligible. <https://www.footiecentral.com/all-you-need-to-know-about-the-new-ballon-dor-award/>

³⁵ “Omar Sívori”, *The Telegraph*, 19 February 2005. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1483849/Omar-Sivori.html>

³⁶ Cianfarani F., “Josè Altafini, Incredibile amisci!”, *I campioni dello sport*, 24 Jul. 2013. <https://www.icampionidellosport.com/2013/07/jose-altafini-incredibile-amisci-2/>

³⁷ “Brazilian football's Italian connection”, *FIFA*, 10 May 2013. <https://www.fifa.com/confederationscup/destination/news/newsid=2076993/index.html>

physical challenges and giving up possession too easily, which earned him the surname of “rabbit”.³⁸ After this debacle, the Italian coaches stopped selecting *oriundi*, and hence choosing Italy for them was not the right choice in hindsight. In addition, FIFA in the meantime banned the dual nationals,³⁹ preventing Altafini and the others any chance of being called again from their native countries national teams. Speaking of Altafini, at the age of 24, his international career was over: for both Brazil and Italy he was considered a mercenary. He once recalled that playing for Italy was the biggest mistake of his life.⁴⁰ He said: “I arrived in Italy as a youngster after Brazil won the World Cup in Sweden. Then I chose Italy and my international career ended at 24. I lost everything for Italy, including two World Cups. I was called a mercenary, a coward. I was subjected to a media lynching”. Asked why he, Angelillo, Sívori and other lesser talents became *oriundi*, he replied: “Sporting, athletic and professional reasons. Hardly ever sentimental ones”.⁴¹

In contrast with the Italian *oriundi*, who acquired the citizenship through their descendants, in the fifties many players who already had caps with their native countries obtained Spanish citizenship without any connection. A famous example is the one of Alfredo Di Stéfano, who was the product of a multicultural immigration. He was born in Argentina in 1926 but each of his grandparents had been born in a different country: one in Italy, one in Argentina, one in France and one in England.⁴² In 1947 he played for Argentina in the South American Football Championship leading his team to the victory with six goals scored in six matches, which were his only appearances for his native country. Due to a strike organized by the Argentinian Players’ Union in 1948 to contrast low salaries and unfavorable contractual condition, Di Stéfano, such as many others Argentinian players, moved to Bogotá to play for Millonarios. During a break in the Colombian League in 1951, he played - without ever holding a Colombian passport - four friendly matches for a Colombian League XI, a team formed by the best players in the league. Reports that he played for the Colombian national team are then erroneous: the team he played with was not an official Colombian national team; in addition, Colombia

³⁸ Cianfarani F., *op. cit.*

³⁹ See paragraph 1.3.1.

⁴⁰ Foot J., *Winning at All Costs: A Scandalous History of Italian Soccer*, New York, Bold Type Books, 2007.

⁴¹ “Soccer: Conte embroiled in *oriundi* row”, ANSA, 23 Mar. 2015. https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2015/03/23/soccer-conte-embroiled-in-oriundi-row_b36bd165-c1d8-4e00-b4cd-31cf942ee281.html

⁴² Lanfranchi P., Taylor M., 2001, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

at the time was not part of the FIFA and the matches did not appear in any official record. Although those matches were not officially recognized, FIFA banned Di Stéfano from making any further appearances for Argentina, on account of his appearances for the Colombia League XI.⁴³ After his transfer to Real Madrid in 1953, as he could not play for Argentina anymore and he was extremely loved in Spain, he decided to play for them. At first, FIFA refused to approve this, but after Di Stéfano acquired Spanish citizenship in 1956 at the urging of the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco (who was a Real Madrid fan), and after a wearying pressure of the Spanish federation, the decision was reversed. In the end, Di Stéfano had 31 caps for Spain, scoring 23 goals, and due to his Spanish citizenship was able to win the European Player of the Year twice, in 1957 and in 1959.⁴⁴ Di Stéfano is not the only example though. His Real Madrid's teammate Ferenc Puskás also played for both Spain and his homeland, Hungary. In 1956, Puskás and his Honvéd team-mates were playing a European Cup match in Spain against Athletic Club Bilbao and their plan was to play more matches in Western Europe in the hope of being hired by European clubs to escape their native country. Nevertheless, while they were in Bilbao the Hungarian uprising against the Soviet suppressors started. He and his teammates chose to defect, confident that Spanish authorities would gladly accept political refugees which represented an anti-communist expression. Moreover, in 1950 his fellow countryman László Kubala was hired from F.C. Barcelona and even obtained Spanish citizenship, fact that increased their hope.⁴⁵ However, because he refused to play again for Honvéd, UEFA imposed a two years ban on Puskás. At this point he could neither go back to Hungary nor play in Europe, and consequently, while playing friendly matches with different teams, he decided to look for a team willing to hire him after his ban was over. Nonetheless, he was considered too old and out of condition by many important clubs, and at the time Real Madrid expressed its interest he was thinking about retiring from football. The negotiation skills of Real Madrid convinced UEFA to reduce his ban so he could start the new season in 1958. In the years in Real Madrid he proved to be everything except a player at the end of his career. At a later time, Puskás and the other Hungarian players in Spain were all granted Spanish citizenship under the label of

⁴³ Radnedge K., "Alfredo Di Stéfano remembered", *WorldSoccer*, 8 Jul. 2014; <https://www.worldsoccer.com/columnists/keir-radnedge/alfredo-di-stefano-remembered-355374>;

⁴⁴ Bell J., "Alfredo Di Stéfano, Soccer Great for Real Madrid, Dies at 88", *The New York Times*, 7 Jul. 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/08/sports/soccer/alfredo-di-stefano-88-soccer-great-dies.html>

⁴⁵ László Kubala is one of the few players who represented three different national teams - Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Spain.

“political refugees”, and some of them even played for the national team. Thus, after 85 caps and 84 goals with Hungary, which he led to the 1954 World Cup final, Puskás acquired Spanish citizenship in 1961 at the age of 34, just in time to make three appearances in the 1962 World Cup.⁴⁶

1.2.3 The controversies surrounding naturalized players in the second half of the twentieth century: the case of French and U.S. national teams

After the sixties, according to Lanfranchi and Taylor, two distinct conceptions of citizenship emerged in football. In the countries where the legal system supported the principle of *jus soli* (such as Portugal), the naturalization of foreign players has led leagues to be perceived as melting pots of nationalities, where everyone was integrated. The Portuguese national team in the 1960s was in fact built around players from the colonies, such as Eusebio and Mario Coluna from Mozambique. In countries applying the *jus sanguini* instead (such as Germany or Italy) the opposite tendency emerged.⁴⁷ In Italy for example, after the above mentioned 1962 World Cup, the situation for foreign players exacerbated. From 1966 to 1990 the regulations in the matter of foreign players changed many times. Italian clubs were prohibited from signing new foreigners between 1966 and 1980, while between 1980 and 1982 one player from a foreign association (including Italian citizens) was allowed, although only in *Serie A*, not in minor leagues. Between 1982 and 1988 it was increased to two and in 1989 to three, with Italian citizens from foreign associations no longer included as foreigners.⁴⁸ Football federations, like governments, have defined citizenship in many different ways, hence the category of foreigner was different from country to country. In fact, some football federations adopted policies which were in contrast with the nation’s legal system. An example is Belgium, where, in the 1960s, a professional footballer could acquire a “Belgian football citizenship” after four years of residence in the country. This citizenship allowed him to play in the

⁴⁶ García-García B., Llopis-Goig R., Martín A., “The Contribution of Real Madrid’s First Five European Cups to the Emergence of a Common Football Space”, in Pyta W., Havemann N. (ed. by), *European Football and Collective Memory*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 96-97.

⁴⁷ Lanfranchi P., Taylor M., 2001, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁴⁸ Lanfranchi P., Taylor M., “Bosman: A Real Revolution?”, in Gouguet J.J. (ed. by), *Le sport professionnel après l’arrêt Bosman: une analyse économique*, Limoges, Presses Universitaires de Limoges, 2004, p. 100.

league as a national, but as a legal foreigner he could not play for the national team. As a consequence, around 1980, Anderlecht had nine non-Belgians in its team but only three of them considered as foreigners.⁴⁹

Naturalization has been both glorified and criticized. As we have seen, there are many great national teams in history built upon naturalized players, such as 1934 Italian team or 1966 Portuguese national team. France for example has always been an example of a multicultural team. The case of the French winning team in the 1998 World Cup in fact, had an important impact on questions such as race, citizenship, and national identity, and it has developed interest in football as an integratory force for minorities. The players' origins included four different continents and eleven different countries represented by France, Guyana, Kalmykia, Poland, Armenia, Ghana, Algeria, Guadeloupe, Martinique, New Caledonia and Argentina, hence that team was called by the media the *Black-Blanc-Beur* (Black-White-Arabs), and it was considered an integration model born on the football pitch and brought to the society of the time. It was the proof that integration worked in the country and that there was nothing that prevented the children of immigrants succeeding in French society. It also became a political message which represented the defeat of xenophobes, directed mainly to the leader of the French National Front Jean-Marie Le Pen, who said that the team was not “a real French team”. The World Cup winning team represented the culture of the melting pot. It was a team composed of players from different ethnic backgrounds, but all of whom were French before playing professional football. As much as football would like to represent a color-blind and cosmopolitan ideal of a multi-cultural society, the reality off the field was not that easy for immigrants, often victim of racial discrimination.⁵⁰ When the French team kept winning in the following years (the European Cup in 2000 and the silver medal in 2006 World Cup) the football integration model seemed to be working. But when in 2010 the French team was eliminated in the group stage of the South Africa World Cup, the blame fell quickly on the non-French-born players, whose commitment to the national team was questioned and all the racial issues came back to the surface. An example is Marine Le Pen, the new leader of the Front National, who argued that the problem with the national team was down to them having “another nationality in their hearts”. Anyway, in 2018 the new success of *Les Bleus* in a World Cup seems to have brought back the multicultural

⁴⁹ Lanfranchi P., Taylor M., 2001, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 9.

national celebration, acceptance, and celebration of ethnic diversity, although the critiques were not missing.⁵¹

The question of commitment for dual nationals in football is a cliché used by the media and fans every time the results are below the expectations, as seen also in the case of the Italian *oriundi* in the sixties. In the United States, another country considered a multicultural model, football (or soccer, as Americans call it) has been the center of many controversies. The growth of football in the United States has been inextricably linked with immigration and dual national communities. In fact, football was introduced to America by European immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, for this reason it was portrayed as a sport for foreigners and it rarely received national media attention. During the second half of the twentieth century football in America was not a prerogative of immigrants communities anymore but it became a largely middle-class youth sport exploding in popularity among suburban areas. During the nineties there was the definitive breakthrough for football in the USA. In 1990 the national team qualified again to a World Cup after forty years of absence; in 1994 USA hosted its first World Cup which was a giant event that broke attendance records for the tournament; and in 1996 the Major League Soccer (MLS) was launched. At the beginning this decade, the United States football federation started to look abroad for eligible players to represent the national team. Thomas Dooley and Ernie Stewart are a glaring example of this recruiting action as they had American descendants. Both of them were sons of American servicemen, they were raised in Europe (Dooley in Germany and Stewart in Netherlands), and were starters, and major contributors to the success of the team, in the 1994 World Cup team. On the other hand David Regis and Roy Wegerle did not have any American descendants and they acquired the US citizenship thanks to their American wives. Wegerle was born and raised in South Africa and obtained his citizenship in 1991, consequently he could participate both to 1994 and 1998 World Cups.⁵² Regis' case was way more delicate. He was born in Martinique, a French territory, and moved to France when he was 15. He had no idea that he was eligible to play for the USA when he was noted by the coach Steve Sampson in 1997. The US federation immediately started the practices for his naturalization and he obtained his American citizenship on May 1998,

⁵¹ Downing J., "Success of French football team masks underlying tensions over race and class", *The Conversation*, 15 Jul. 2018. <https://theconversation.com/success-of-french-football-team-masks-underlying-tensions-over-race-and-class-99781>

⁵² Bohland J.D., *op. cit.*, pp. 184-185.

only a month before the beginning of the World Cup in France. At the time, he was naturalized he spoke little English, had been to the United States only three or four times and had trained for only a week with the American football team, for this reason the media started to question whether it was a fair choice to field a player who did not contribute to the qualification process.⁵³ The 1998 World Cup was a complete disaster for the US national team with three defeats out of three matches. Like happened to Altafini, the blame for the debacle was mostly given to Regis, who developed the reputation within the American media of a mercenary who had not fought for the cause during the qualifying matches.⁵⁴ Coach Sampson, who before the World Cup defended his player, turned against Regis as well. “Who am I to judge whether David Regis, the husband of an American wife, has less of a right to become an American than anyone else?” Sampson said in May 1998. “He has every right to do that. We have worked within the system; we have done nothing illegal”.⁵⁵ In 2014 instead he declared: “I made a mistake allowing Regis to join so late in the game. It affected our chemistry. I probably should have left him off the squad and let Jeff Agoos play left back. But he was a good player, playing the Bundesliga. It was very attractive”.⁵⁶ Even though team chemistry was definitely a cause for the debacle, it is exaggerated to blame only a dual national for its absence and for the general failure of the team. Although Regis continued to represent the USA, being also part of the successful 2002 World Cup expedition, his story will always be used as a warning to future national team managers of the dangers of selecting dual national players. In fact, before the 2014 World Cup, the experience of Regis came back into the limelight because of the high number of dual nationals present in the national team. Although most of them were sons of Americans (unlike Regis), all dual national players were outlined as worthy of the same suspicion Regis faced.⁵⁷ An example is Julian Green, born in the USA from an American father and a German mother, he moved to Germany when he was two years old. When he was called for the first time to play for America in the spring of 2014,

⁵³ Longman J., “SOCCER: They All Come to Play for America; Regis Is the Newest Citizen on Polyglot U.S. World Cup Soccer Team”, *The New York Times*, 21 May 1998. <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/21/sports/soccer-they-all-come-play-for-america-regis-newest-citizen-polyglot-us-world-cup.html>

⁵⁴ Bohland J.D., *op. cit.*, p. 185.

⁵⁵ Longman J., *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ Lalas G., “What Jurgen Klinsmann Can Learn From Steve Sampson & USMNT 1998 World Cup disaster”, *MLSsoccer.com*, 1 Apr. 2014. <https://www.mlssoccer.com/post/2014/04/01/what-jurgen-klinsmann-can-learn-steve-sampson-usmnts-1998-world-cup-disaster>

⁵⁷ Bohland J.D., *op. cit.*, p. 186.

and his chances to participate to the World Cup increased, the media pointed out that he did not help the team during the qualifying rounds and it could be a risk calling him for the tournament. According to Freedman, although Green could be considered a real American, like Regis he became a “job stealer” who had not fully assimilated into the team, and who could create problems of team chemistry. The author ignored the fact that worldwide it is common to call players who did not contribute to the qualification and them being dual nationals had nothing to do with team chemistry.⁵⁸ Apart from Green, in the 2014 World Cup final roster was plenty of dual nationals such as the German-American players Jermaine Jones, Fabian Johnson, Timothy Chandler, John-Anthony Brooks, or other dual nationals like Aron Jóhannsson (Iceland) and Mix Diskerud (Norway). Contrary to all of the dire predictions of how the dual nationals would fit into the team, and to all of the insiders who defined them “not real Americans”, the 2014 World Cup was a success for the US national team and the naturalized players proved to be among the best and most important contributors to this success. In conclusion, as Bohland indicates, rather than judging these choices as opportunistic and mercenary, they should be considered as sensible professional decisions, especially in a globalized world where labor freely flows across borders. In fact, the World Cup offers to football players the chance to exhibit their skills at the highest level, and dual nationals are fortunate to have the opportunity to choose the solution they prefer.⁵⁹

1.3 FIFA eligibility rules

1.3.1 The evolution of the requirements to represent a national team: the first regulations of 1962 and the amendment in 2004

In the light of the continuous nationality exchange, at the 33rd FIFA Congress in Santiago, Chile, in 1962, FIFA decided to provide new regulations regarding the

⁵⁸ Freedman J., “What the legacy of David Regis says about the USMNT's Julian Green”, *MLSsoccer.com*, 19 Apr. 2014. <https://www.mlssoccer.com/post/2014/04/19/what-legacy-david-regis-says-about-usmnts-julian-green-word>

⁵⁹ Bohland J.D., *op. cit.*, pp. 187-192.

eligibility of players. It enacted what became Article 18 of the Regulations Governing the Application of Statutes, which stated that:

1. Any player who is a naturalized citizen of a country in virtue of that country's laws shall be eligible to play for a national or representative team of that country.
2. If a player has been included in a national or representative team of a country for which he is eligible to play pursuant to 1, he shall not be permitted to take part in an international match for another country. Accordingly, any player who is qualified to play for more than one national association (i.e. who has dual nationality) will be deemed to have committed himself to one association only when he plays his first international match in an official competition (at any level) for that association.
3. The only players exempt from this provision are those whose nationality has been changed not voluntarily but as the result of an international decree either granting independence to a region or ceding part of one country to another.⁶⁰

This regulation set some limitations to the eligibility of players for the national teams. First of all, it is important to notice that with this regulation FIFA leaves the question of naturalization to the laws of its member countries. At the time, FIFA did not care according to which parameters a nation granted citizenship, if a player was considered a citizen under a particular country's laws, he was eligible to play for that country's national side. Anyway, the most significant change was to forbid to footballers to play for more than one national team. In fact, as we can see from point 2, from the moment a footballer plays his first international match in an official competition (excluding friendly matches) for one association, he is not free to play for another national team. The only circumstances he could play for another national team are explained in section 3, which was conceived to cover situations like the breakup of the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia.⁶¹

There have been little changes in the regulations for over forty years, but in 2004 FIFA, due to the increasing globalized nature of football, began to update the eligibility rules to prevent players from taking undue advantage of its rules on switching nationality. The

⁶⁰ The original document of the 1962 edition of the FIFA Statutes could not be retrieved in the online FIFA Archives. "England National Football Team Player Eligibility", *England Football Online*, 5 Mar. 2011. <http://www.englishfootballonline.com/TeamBack/Eligibility.html>

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

two situations that triggered this change in the legislation regarding eligibility were the cases of the Togolese and the Qatari national team. In June 2003, during the 2004 Africa Cup of Nations qualification games, Togo fielded four out of its five naturalized Brazilian players (Alessandro Faria, Jesus Fabio de Oliveira, Christiano Parreira and Jefferson de Souza) during the victories against Cape Verde and Kenya. The link between them and Togo was Antonio Dumas, the national team's Brazilian coach. He is said to have noticed the five of them and convinced them to adopt Togolese nationality. Kenya and Cape Verde protested to Confederation of African Football (CAF) over Togo's action, but they claimed that some of their citizens can trace their roots back to Brazil. In fact, the Brazilian-born players are all of African descent and names like "de Souza" and "Parreira" are common names in Togo, but with the new regulations the federations would have had many troubles to prove the truthfulness of this declarations.⁶² The other, and most famous, case was related to the Qatari national team, which for many years had used the naturalization of foreign players to enhance its level. Their justification is that they are a country built by foreigners and that there is not enough talent in the local population to be competitive on the international scene. In 2004 Qatar was looking for a striker that could help the team qualify to the 2006 World Cup, and found three Brazilian players in Bundesliga, Aílton, Dédé and Leandro, who did not have any appearances with Brazil. Aílton at the time was top scorer of the league and led his team, Werder Bremen, to the league title, but realistically his chances to be called by Brazil were nearly zero. For this reason, when the Qatari football federation offered him more than EUR 1 million and the chance to play at an international level, also if he did not have any connection with the country, he accepted. Aílton was already thirty at the time and for him this was the only chance for an international career. He denied to be a mercenary: "Money is not the decisive factor here, as I earn good money at Werder Bremen. If Brazil ignores me for 2006, then I have to find another way to get there", he declared. Unfortunately for him when this rumors became incessant FIFA decided to change its rules, making Aílton ineligible for Qatar.⁶³ According to Jesse Fink, an Australian writer on Asian football, for a country the size of Qatar, which has a population of less than one million people, there are few other options. He affirmed: «the only way Qatar or Bahrain are ever going to be

⁶² Durosimi T., "Samba mix inspires Togo", *BBC Sport*, 23 Jun. 2003. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/africa/3014732.stm>

⁶³ "Fifa rules on eligibility", *BBC Sport*, 18 Mar. 2004. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/africa/3523266.stm>

competitive is to import players and naturalize them». ⁶⁴ For this reason in March 2004, the FIFA Emergency Committee, in the light of the intention of a number of Brazilian players to play for the Qatari representative team, declared that any player assuming a new nationality without a clear connection to that country will not be eligible to play for it. These practices were considered “to be in contravention of the aim and object of the FIFA Statutes”. To protect the Statutes, on March 17, 2004, the FIFA Emergency Committee has ruled that for a player to be eligible to play for another Association’s national team, he must fulfil at least one of the following conditions:

- a) the player was born on the territory of the relevant Association.
- b) his biological mother or biological father was born on the territory of the relevant Association.
- c) his grandmother or grandfather was born on the territory of the relevant Association.
- d) he has lived continuously for at least two years on the territory of the relevant Association. ⁶⁵

The substantial difference with the 1962 regulations is that, although FIFA still leaves the decisions about the requirements to obtain the citizenship to the law of the member states, it declares ineligible any player who has no clear connection with the country he intends to represent. The FIFA Emergency Committee’s decision is final and legally valid since the issuance date. ⁶⁶ Nonetheless, in the 2004 FIFA Statutes the major substantive change regarded the participation of players to youth tournaments which committed them irrevocably to one association. The new provision seeks to rectify this problem by allowing players the change association under particular circumstances as stated in the Regulations Governing the Application of the Statutes 2004 FIFA Statutes, section 3 Article 15:

- (a) Up to his 21st birthday, a player may only once request changing the Association for which he is eligible to play international matches.

⁶⁴ Montague J., “The football 'invaders from Brazil””, *CNN*, 19 Jan. 2009. <https://edition.cnn.com/2009/SPORT/football/01/19/football.nation/index.html#soundoff>

⁶⁵ “Players seeking naturalisation with no clear connection to country- ineligible to represent national teams”, *FIFA.com*, 17 Mar. 2004. <https://www.fifa.com/who-we-are/news/players-seeking-naturalisation-with-clear-connection-country-ineligibl-91082>

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

A Player may exercise this right to change Associations only if he has not played at “A” international level for his current Association and if at the time of his first full or partial appearance in an international match in an official competition of any other category, he already had such nationalities. Changing Associations is not permitted during the preliminary competition of a FIFA competition, continental championship or Olympic Tournaments if a player has already been fielded in a match of one of these competitions.

If a player fulfils these requirements, shall submit a written request to the FIFA general secretariat, and after submitting the request, the player is no longer qualified to play for his current association’s team. Any player older than twenty-one at the time of the implementation of these provisions has twelve months to submit his request.⁶⁷ Although these important limitations were introduced, in 2007 the then FIFA President Joseph Blatter before the draw for the preliminary round of the 2010 World Cup finals expressed his concerns about the amount of Brazilian players playing for other national representatives which could become eligible after only two years of residence in the country. He stated: “If we don't stop this farce, if we don't take care about the invaders from Brazil towards Europe, Asia and Africa then, in the 2014 or the 2018 World Cup, out of the 32 teams you will have 16 full of Brazilian players. This is a real, real danger. Two years is definitely not enough. In Brazil there are 60 million football players; every third person kicks the ball”.⁶⁸ The Statutes were officially amended in 2008 when the requirements for eligibility were included, and after Blatter’s declarations, a change was made: a player who intends to acquire a new nationality without having soil or blood connections has to live continuously in the country of the relevant association for at least five years (and not two as in the previous regulation) after reaching the age of 18. On the other hand, for a player who already possesses the nationality of the relevant country, is eligible after living continuously in that country for at least two years. In June 2009, FIFA Congress passed a motion that removed the age limit for players who had already played for a country’s national team at youth level to change national associations, and since then the “Eligibility to play for representative teams” section of the “Regulations

⁶⁷ “FIFA Statutes”, issued by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), January 2004 edition.

⁶⁸ “Blatter wants EU to allow quotas”, *BBC Sport*, 26 Nov. 2007. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/7112767.stm>

Governing the Application of the Statutes” has changed only in the numeration (now Art. 5-8).⁶⁹

1.3.2 The application of the rules

Although the nationality switches have continued regularly according to the rules, Blatter’s predictions about 2014 and 2018 World Cups proved to be false. In fact, in 2014 World Cup 85 players out of 736 players (11.54%) were born outside the country they were representing and only 24 of them had taken the opportunity to change national affiliation which corresponds with only 3.26%. For instance, this percentage is line with the 2004 Athens Olympics Games where the 2.6% of the athletes had changed their sporting nationality.⁷⁰ In the 2018 World Cup instead, an analysis of the 32 teams participating in the 2018 World Cup demonstrates that there were 82 naturalized players distributed in 22 teams, which corresponded to the 11.14% of the total 736 players, still a low percentage.⁷¹ Anyway, according to some authors, Blatter’s concerns were not unfounded. According to Hall, the rules are not sufficiently strict, in particular the provision of gaining eligibility due to a grandparent’s birthplace should be deleted from the FIFA Statutes. The removal of this provision would prevent players to immediately play for a country due to the fact that a grandmother or grandfather was born in that nation sixty to eighty years ago. Footballers would still be enabled to represent the country of birth of their parents because that is a more direct connection. In addition, the author suggests to increase controls regarding the five-year residency requirement for foreign-born athletes who do not have ancestral ties. By implementing the controls and deleting naturalization on the basis of the grandparent’s birthplace, FIFA can strengthen the rules

⁶⁹ “FIFA Statutes”, issued by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), June 2019 edition.

⁷⁰ Hafner Y., “Blurred Nationalities: The list of the “23” and the eligibility rules at the 2014 FIFA World Cup.” *International Sports Law Commentaries*, 23 Jun. 2014. <https://www.asser.nl/SportsLaw/Blog/post/blurred-nationalities-the-list-of-the-23-and-the-eligibility-rules-at-the-2014-fifa-world-cup>

⁷¹ Berkowitz B., Alcantara C., Ulmanu M., Esteban C., “How foreign-born players put the ‘world’ in World Cup”, *The Washington Post*, 18 Jun. 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/sports/world-cup-countries-of-birth/>

and close some of the loopholes that decrease the uniformity of the regulations.⁷² A recent case which had an extensive media resonance is the one of Diego Costa. The Brazilian-born player was called up by the then Brazil coach Luiz Felipe Scolari to play two friendly matches in 2013. However, as he had moved to Spain years before, in 2014 he acquired Spanish citizenship and decided to switch sides and represent Spain in official matches, probably hoping to have higher chances of winning the World Cup. Although his choice was portrayed as traitorous by some officials of the Brazilian football federation, it was completely conformed with the Art. 7 and Art. 8 of the “Regulations Governing the Application of the Statutes” as he had no appearances in official competitions with Brazil and he lived for more than five years in Spain after the age of 18. It is important to mention that such regulations are decided collectively by the members of FIFA and that the Brazilian Football Federation has not made any official move to modify the rules.⁷³ Many players on the other hand have been declared ineligible by FIFA. For example, Syria was disqualified from 2014 World Cup qualifications for fielding an ineligible player, the striker George Mourad. Mourad was born in Beirut, Lebanon, to Syrian parents, and then he was brought up in Sweden and for this reason in 2005 he was named in Sweden’s national team to play two friendly matches in the United States. However in 2011 he moved to Syria, and because his parents were Syrian-born he was called up by the national team to play a friendly match against Iraq and an official match of the World Cup qualifiers against Tajikistan, which costed Syria the forfeit in that match and the expulsion from the tournament.⁷⁴ Although Mourad fulfilled several conditions for a nation switch, the core of the issue was not his right to play for Syria but their failure to check in with FIFA first. As we mentioned above, in the Art. 8 part 3 of the “Regulations Governing the Application of the Statutes” on eligibility says that any player “shall submit a written, substantiated request to the FIFA general secretariat” for a decision.⁷⁵ Another important case involved Paraguayan-born player Nelson Cabrera. Cabrera, who already had one cap in a friendly match with Paraguay, on September 2016 was fielded by Bolivia during two

⁷² Hall C.D., “Fishing for All-Stars in a Time of Global Free Agency: Understanding FIFA Eligibility rules and the Impact on the U.S. Men’s National Team”, *Marquette Sports Law Review*, Vol. 23, 2012, pp. 205-206.

⁷³ Hafner Y., *op. cit.*

⁷⁴ Rainbow J., “Syria pay the price for their own incompetence”, *WorldSoccer*, 22 Aug. 2011. <https://www.worldsoccer.com/columnists/keir-radnedge/syria-pay-the-price-for-their-own-incompetence-330993>

⁷⁵ “FIFA Statutes”, issued by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), June 2019 edition.

matches of the 2018 World Cup qualifiers, against Peru (the match was won 2-0 by Bolivia) and against Chile (the match finished 0-0). After the Peruvian and Chilean football federations informed FIFA, Cabrera was subsequently found to be ineligible, which resulted in the awarding of 3–0 wins for Bolivia's opponents, affecting the final standings in the table.⁷⁶ As mentioned above, under FIFA rules, players can only play for an adopted country if they have lived and played there for five years, and they have not appeared in a competitive game for another national side. The fact which determined Cabrera's ineligibility then was not that he played for Paraguay in a friendly match, which would not have been a problem, but that he only moved to Bolivia four years before the match against Peru.⁷⁷ As Lanfranchi and Taylor observed, with the implementation of the FIFA eligibility rules, the notions of dual or multi-nationality in football do not exist anymore: one can be either French or Moroccan but not both. For talented players who are dual nationals this involves deciding at some point of their careers which international side to play for.⁷⁸

1.3.3 The case of the United Kingdom and the “Irish situation”

Although these rules on eligibility generally apply to every member nation, the naturalization still depends on the country's own nationality or citizenship laws. The national teams of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales represent a special case as the four of them are under the sovereign state of the United Kingdom and there is no such thing as English, Scottish, Welsh, or Northern Irish citizenship. For this reason over the years there has been a series of additional agreements between national football associations of the United Kingdom to avoid that every player in possession of a British passport could choose which of the four national teams to represent.⁷⁹ The first Home Nations Agreement was ratified by the four British associations during the meeting of the

⁷⁶ “Bolivia sanctioned for fielding ineligible player”, FIFA.com, 1 Nov. 2016. <https://www.fifa.com/worldcup/news/bolivia-sanctioned-for-fielding-ineligible-player-2847422>

⁷⁷ Homewood B., “FIFA denies returning four points to Bolivia over ineligible player”, *Reuters*, 3 Nov. 2016. [reuters.com/article/us-soccer-worldcup-bolivia/fifa-denies-returning-four-points-to-bolivia-over-ineligible-player-idUSKBN12Y2HF](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-soccer-worldcup-bolivia/fifa-denies-returning-four-points-to-bolivia-over-ineligible-player-idUSKBN12Y2HF)

⁷⁸ Lanfranchi P., Taylor M., 2001, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁷⁹ “England National Football Team Player Eligibility”, *op. cit.*

International Football Association Board (IFAB)⁸⁰ on February 27, 1993, but it had already come into force on February the 1st. The agreement was released by the Scottish Football Association (SFA) and it establishes the criteria which should determine the eligibility of the player to be selected by one of the national teams of the British associations:

1. His country of birth.
2. The country of birth of his natural mother or father.
3. The country of birth of his natural grandmother or grandfather.
4. Where the player, both natural parents, and both natural grandparents are born outside the UK, but the player is the holder of a current British passport, he may play for the country of his choice.⁸¹

However this agreement generated several misunderstandings and debates. For instance, David Johnson was a Jamaican immigrant who was raised by foster parents in England, and for this reason held a British passport. After having played four friendly matches with his native Jamaica and one match with England B, in 1999 he was summoned first by Wales (but he withdrew from the squad due to injury) and later by Scotland as he was considered eligible due to his British passport. Apparently, his agent was told by the FA that he could play for any of the four home countries because he held a British passport. The agent also declared that he was never asked about Johnson's parents or grandparents nationality. However, after an investigation the SFA discovered that Johnson's natural mother was English and for this reason he was ineligible to play for any British country but England, because Scottish federation had chosen to abide by the agreement. It is important to remember that according to the FIFA regulations of that period he could have been eligible to play for Scotland. This case demonstrates the confusion surrounding

⁸⁰ The International Football Association Board (IFAB) is the only body authorized to decide and agree changes to the Laws of the Game of association football. IFAB was founded in 1886 to agree standardized laws for international competition. Although it is a separate body from FIFA, since its establishment in 1904, the football's governing body has recognized IFAB's jurisdiction over the Laws. As a legacy of association football's origins in the United Kingdom, the IFAB is comprised of the four British football associations (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) with one vote each, and FIFA, covering the remaining 207 national associations, with four votes. Passing a motion requires a three-quarters majority. Overview, *TheIFAB.com*. <https://www.theifab.com/overview>

⁸¹ McCrone D., *The New Sociology of Scotland*, Sage, London, 2017, p. 541.

this regulation, which was unfamiliar even for the federations who signed it.⁸² The situation is even more controversial if we consider the case happened the previous year with Maik Taylor, a goalkeeper born in Germany to an English father and a German mother. According to FIFA rules he was eligible to play for any of the four countries due to his British citizenship, but according to the 1993 agreement he was only eligible to play for England. Nonetheless, in 1998 he was called-up by the Irish Football Association (IFA) to play for Northern Ireland although he did not have any connections with the country. From that moment he played 88 times for his adopted country becoming a legend of the national team.⁸³ It is hard to understand why Taylor was allowed to choose which country to represent while Johnson's request was denied. It is presumable that the difference of treatment was attributable to the fact that Taylor had been contacted only by the IFA, whereas Johnson attracted the interest of different national teams. In January 2000, Scotland's coach Craig Brown as well expressed all his perplexities: "I was told by FIFA that David Johnson was totally eligible and twice I called his club manager George Burley and he told me he was totally eligible. But I was assuming that FIFA were aware of our home countries agreement and apparently they were not. I did not think I could get any higher authority than FIFA so if we play David Johnson tomorrow they would not complain and if we played him at Wembley, there would not have been a problem with FIFA. But there was the agreement with the four nations".⁸⁴ It was clear that the associations needed to re-discuss the agreement, especially after the change of FIFA's eligibility rules, and decide whether it was the case to nullify it or to retain the agreement. SFA executive David Taylor was a supporter of the agreement and said that he did not want the situation to "become a free-for-all with the home countries trying to get the best players available".⁸⁵ The four British associations met on March the 1st, 2004 and unanimously agreed to endorse the agreement reached in February 1993 ignoring FIFA's

⁸² Gaunt K., "Johonson devastated at Scottish no-go", *Independent*, 4 Nov. 1999. <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/scottish/johonson-devastated-at-scottish-no-go-742830.html>

⁸³ McKinley S., "Taylor is still true to Northern Ireland cause", *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 Nov. 2008. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/sport/football/international/taylor-is-still-true-to-northern-ireland-cause-28454962.html>

⁸⁴ Mackie F., "How Gentlemen Became Rogues over Agreement", *The Mail on Sunday*, 2 January 2000. <https://www.questia.com/read/1G1-109641746/how-gentlemen-became-rogues-over-agreement-brown>

⁸⁵ Broadfoot D., "National side at mercy of FIFA proposals Eligibility issue to be decided by home nations pact", *The Herald*, 18 Feb. 2004. heraldscotland.com/news/12522522.national-side-at-mercy-of-fifa-proposals-eligibility-issue-to-be-decided-by-home-nations-pact/

provisions which permitted to a player holding a British passport to be eligible after two years of residency in the country.⁸⁶ This agreement was included in the “Commentary” of the “Regulations for the Status and Transfer of Players” published by FIFA on December 2006. The conditions to play for one of the British associations remained the same of the 1993 agreement. Only the old point 4 was modified:

2. If a player has a British passport, but no territorial relationship as provided for in conditions a-c above, he can choose for which of the British associations he wants to play. (e.g. a player who was born on the Cayman Islands and holds British nationality can choose to play for any of the four British associations if called up by a British association).⁸⁷

In 2009, after the final rewriting of the FIFA eligibility rules in 2008, the Home Nations Agreement was revised. The four British countries have agreed to remove a clause present in the FIFA Statutes that enables players to gain eligibility for one of the national teams due to a period of two years of residency in the country. The clause removed, present in the Art. 6 point 1, states:

d) He has lived continuously on the territory of the relevant association for at least two years.

In the Art. 6 point 2 is clarified the situation according to which this clause can be removed:

2. Regardless of par. 1 above, associations sharing a common nationality may make an agreement under which item d) of par. 1 of this article is deleted completely or amended to specify a longer time limit. Such agreements shall be lodged with and approved by the Council.⁸⁸

Nevertheless, the most important change concerns the Art. 7 item (d) of the FIFA Statutes which requires a player who wants to represent a new national team to have lived continuously for at least five years after the age of 18 on the territory of the relevant association.⁸⁹ This rule provides for an exception for the British home nations, called

⁸⁶ Broadfoot D., “Identity crisis not much of a drama”, *The Herald*, 2 Mar. 2004. <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/12516383.identity-crisis-not-much-of-a-drama/>

⁸⁷ “Commentary: Regulations for the Status and Transfer of Players”, issued by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) on December 2006.

⁸⁸ “FIFA Statutes”, issued by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), June 2019 edition.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

“education clause”. According to this clause, a player who has engaged in a minimum of five years education under the age of 18 within the territory of the relevant association can apply to Players’ Status Committee to request for an exception to the Art. 7 item (d) rule and become eligible for that British national team. If the Committee can establish that the move was for reasons not related to football (e.g. family, asylum, cultural reasons etc.) then the exception will be granted.⁹⁰ With these changes several players became eligible: Andrew Driver, English-born winger who was previously considered ineligible for Scotland although he moved to the country at the age of 11 because he did not have Scottish relatives;⁹¹ Ryan Shawcross and Andy Dorman, who were both born in England but raised in Wales became eligible to represent their foster country. If this regulation would have been hypothetically valid earlier, would have meant England striker Michael Owen could have chosen to represent Wales while former Wales captain Ryan Giggs could have played for England.⁹²

A particular case is the “Irish situation”. In recent years, there have been many conflicts between the Irish Football Association (IFA – Northern Ireland) and the Football Association of Ireland (FAI - Republic of Ireland) for the eligibility of players born in the Irish island. First of all, it is important to mention the Art. 1 point (vi) of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), or British-Irish Agreement, signed in 1998, which states:

- vi. recognise the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland.⁹³

Consequently, a player born in Northern Ireland have a right by birth to Irish and British citizenship which entitles him to be selected for the representative teams of both Northern

⁹⁰ “‘Football’s Coming Home’ ...but to which country? FIFA’s National Team Eligibility Rules Explained”, *The National Law Review*, 19 Feb. 2019. <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/football-s-coming-home-to-which-country-fifa-s-national-team-eligibility-rules>

⁹¹ “Andrew Driver receives Scotland eligibility boost”, *BBC Sport*, 9 Jun. 2010. http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/teams/h/heart_of_midlothian/8731562.stm

⁹² Shuttleworth P., “Shawcross now eligible for Wales”, *BBC Sport*, 13 Oct. 2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/internationals/8302195.stm>

⁹³ “British-Irish Agreement”, signed by the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland on April the 10th, 1998. <https://www.britishirishcouncil.org/about/british-irish-agreement>

Ireland and Republic of Ireland. In contrast, players born in the Republic of Ireland do not have such dual nationality from birth and cannot play for Northern Ireland unless they have a parent or grandparent who was born there. The relevant cases which had more media coverage were the ones of Darron Gibson and of Daniel Kearns. Darron Gibson was born in Northern Ireland and had no blood connections with the Republic of Ireland. After having represented Northern Ireland at Under 16 and Under 17 levels, he switched allegiance to the Republic of Ireland, which represented at all juvenile levels until 2007 when he made his debut with the senior squad in an official competition during the Euro 2008 qualifiers. Despite the strident complaints of the IFA, Gibson's defection to the Republic of Ireland appeared to have the tacit approval of FIFA although his decision was in conflict with the governing body's own statutes.⁹⁴ After the IFA asked for clarifications, on June the 1st, 2008 FIFA ruled that any player wishing to play international football for the Republic of Ireland must have been born there, have a parent or grandparent born there, or have lived there continuously for two years, as commanded by the Statutes. However, the FAI argued that nothing had changed on FIFA's stated position and that any player from Northern Ireland is eligible to play for either Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland, as the GFA states. In the end, IFA's protestations were rejected.⁹⁵ In 2010, for the similar case of Daniel Kearns, the IFA challenged the FAI in the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS). In the arbitral award, it is mentioned that on 7 March 2007 FIFA stated that «[...] this circumstance is rather unique and the FIFA Statutes and regulations do not provide for a solution» to the IFA situation. On November of the same year FIFA suggested that «[...] every player born on the territory of Northern Ireland, holding the UK nationality and being entitled to a passport of the Republic of Ireland or born on the territory of the Republic of Ireland and holding the Irish nationality could either play for the [FAI] or the [IFA], under the condition that all other relevant prerequisites pertaining to player's eligibility for a specific Association team are fulfilled». The IFA expressed its disagreement with this proposal, which was however accepted by the FAI. Consequently, the FIFA Executive Committee agreed that there was

⁹⁴ Hassan D., McCullough S., Moreland E., "North or South? Darron Gibson and the issue of player eligibility within Irish soccer", *Soccer & Society*, Vol. 10 No. 6, 2009, p. 747.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 741.

no need to change the existing regulations, and the appeal filed by the IFA to make Kearns ineligible by the FAI was rejected.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ “CAS 2010/A/2071 Irish Football Association v/ Football Association of Ireland, Daniel Kearns and FIFA”, Court of Arbitration for Sport, 2010.

Chapter 2

Football in China

2.1 A historical introduction

2.1.1 The origins of the game: from the *cuju* to the imported modern sport

Despite what most people may think, the game of football in China has a long history. Chinese people claim to be the first inventors of the game, and Chinese authorities were extremely pleased when Joseph S. Blatter, former FIFA President, in the occasion of the 2004 China Football Expo held in Beijing recognized China as “the cradle of the earliest forms of football, having firmly planted the roots of our sport and helping set the course for it to grow into the beautiful game it is today”.⁹⁷ Blatter’s statement refers to the *cuju* (蹴鞠, *cùjū*), literally “hit the ball with the feet”, an ancient Chinese game which consisted in kicking a ball using the feet to score points. According to the legend, *cuju* was invented by the mythologic Yellow Emperor *Huangdi* (黄帝, *Huángdì*, his traditional reign dates are 2698 – 2598 BCE) as a military training for the troops. Legend aside, the first archeological traces of the game, terracotta and stone balls, date back to the Neolithic period. Nevertheless, the diffusion of the *cuju* increased during the *Han* 汉 dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), when it became popular in the imperial court.⁹⁸ During the *Han* period *cuju* was not played with bundles of old cloth or with terracotta or stone footballs, but with exquisite silk brocade spheres. Thanks to the *Han* writer Li You (ca. 55-135 AD), we are aware of the number of players, six-a-side, and the requirements for fair play.⁹⁹ During the *Tang* 唐 (618-907) and *Song* 宋 (960-1279) dynasties the popularity of the game

⁹⁷ “Football fever hits Beijing”, *FIFA.com*, 20 Jul. 2004. <https://www.fifa.com/about-fifa/who-we-are/news/football-fever-hits-beijing-93216>

⁹⁸ Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *Storia del calcio cinese: dalle origini ai giorni nostri*, Torino, Bradipolibri, 2017, pp. 10-11.

⁹⁹ Simons R., *Bamboo Goalposts: One Man’s Quest to Teach the People’s Republic of China to Love Football*, London, Pan Macmillan UK, 2008, Kindle Edition, Part 1, Chap. 2.

reached its peak as it was widespread in the imperial court, and therefore in the higher social classes, as well as in the streets of the country. During this period it was common to organize *cuju* matches during the emperor's birthday.¹⁰⁰ In large cities a *cuju* organization, known as the *Qi Yun She*, or *Yuan She*, was even set up. This is widely recognized as the earliest professional *cuju* club, and its participants included amateur lovers of the game and ex-pros.¹⁰¹ When the Mongol dynasty of the *Yuan* 元 (1279-1368) conquered China, the game remained popular only among the lower classes, and gradually disappeared during the *Ming* 明 (1368-1644) and *Qing* 清 (1644-1911) periods.¹⁰² The nature of the game also varied greatly in the different periods: *cuju* was originally an aggressive competitive game and, mainly during the *Han* and *Tang* dynasty, it had been adopted and greatly favored by military officials to train soldiers in order to improve their physiques and cultivate their fighting spirit, due to its competitiveness. As time passed, during *Song* and *Yuan* dynasties, vigorous competition was replaced by a primarily exhibitive scope: grace and harmony of movement were given priority.¹⁰³ Nowadays, the *cuju* is a Chinese cultural heritage and is quite common, walking in the Chinese cities' parks, to see Chinese people playing with a *jianzi* (毽子, *jiànzi*), a sort of feather with a base made of metal.¹⁰⁴

Modern sport in China arrived together with Western powers during the 19th century accompanied by military force; therefore, it is not an indigenous product, but rather an imported one.¹⁰⁵ The flourishing of sport in China started in the foreign "concessions", areas of the Chinese soil controlled by foreign countries. These "concessions" were the points of convergence of Western culture in China, and hence were fundamental for the spread of modern sports activities.¹⁰⁶ Western ideals and methods of education were introduced into schools. These included physical exercise, gymnastics, and modern games, which were prescribed by the Qing government.¹⁰⁷ Until the first decades of the

¹⁰⁰ Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁰¹ Simons R., *op. cit.*, Part 1, Chap. 2.

¹⁰² Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁰³ Fan H., Tan., "Sport in China: Conflict between Tradition and Modernity, 1840s to 1930s", in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 2002, pp. 190-191.

¹⁰⁴ Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ Fan H., Tan H., *op. cit.*, p. 189.

¹⁰⁶ Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ Fan H., Tan H., *op. cit.*, pp. 195-196.

20th century, in China there has been a conflict between conservatives and radicals on whether the country should reject or accept Western sport. This conflict was solved with a debate in the 1930s, when modern physical education and sport were finally established in China as a part of Chinese modern culture.¹⁰⁸ The history of modern football in China started from the territories occupied by foreigners, mainly Shanghai and Hong Kong. The first match witnessed in the annals was between the Shanghai Athletic Club and the *Engineers* in 1879. The first football competitions were a matter solely for foreign teams and it is hard to tell when Chinese teams were allowed to participate, nevertheless it is presumed that the first match of a local team was against a team formed by British sailors. In 1904 the Chinese Football Team was formed in Hong Kong. It was fully composed by Chinese ethnic players; in 1910 the team was renamed South China Football Club, and it represented China in the various competitions, marking the history of Chinese football in those decades.¹⁰⁹ In 1915 Shanghai hosted the second Far Eastern Games and the event attracted an enormous crowd. In football, China was represented by the South China F.C., and the final of the tournament against a Filipino team was attended by 100.000 fans that swarmed into the field after the victory.¹¹⁰ The YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association)¹¹¹ national physical director wrote about this event: “For the first time men from the north, south, east, and west stood together and cheered for China, and it mattered not whether an athlete was from north, south, east, or west.”¹¹² The South China F.C. also won the ensuing editions of the tournament, and was at that time considered a power in Asian football.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 189.

¹⁰⁹ Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *op cit.*, pp. 19-20.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 24.

¹¹¹ The YMCA is a Christian Ecumenical organization founded in London in 1844 by George Williams, with the purpose to promote a better life and to guarantee the rights of the individual after the profound economic and social changes occurred after the Industrial Revolution of those years. In the following years, the group expanded and in 1855 became an international confederation represented by many countries. The projects and the services promoted by local YMCAs focused on youth development through a wide variety of youth activities, including providing athletic facilities, holding classes for a wide variety of skills, promoting Christianity, and humanitarian work. For example, in China the YMCA organized in 1910 of the National Games and in 1913 launched the first Far Eastern Games. <http://www.ymca.it/ymca/storia/>; Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *op cit.*, pp. 20-21.

¹¹² Morris A.D., “How Could Anyone Respect Us?” A Century of Olympic Consciousness and National Anxiety in China”, *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Spring-Summer 2008, Volume XIV No. 2, p. 26.

In 1924, the Chinese Football Association was founded in Shanghai and, in 1926, organized the first national championship. The championship was played annually until 1933 when it was interrupted due to financial problems of the participating teams.¹¹³ In China, in this specific historical period the questions in sports were how to engage in modern physical activities and which of them should be elected as “national game”, as it was observed that the world’s super powers all had a national sport. At first, Wu Cheng, a physical education expert suggested swimming, since the other sports were considered to be of foreign origin.¹¹⁴ The question was solved in 1935 when the *Chin Fen Sport Monthly* (勤奋体育月报, *Qínfèn tǐyù yuèbào*), a Shanghai magazine, launched a survey among the readers to elect the national sport. When the results were announced, football and basketball were the most voted and were defined as “Chinese national co-pastimes”.¹¹⁵ In those years a key figure in Chinese football was Lee Wai Tong (李惠堂, *Lǐ Huìtáng*, 1905-1979), considered as the best Chinese player of all times and remembered with the epithet “Football King of Asia” (亚洲球王, *Yàzhōu Qiúwáng*). He led the South China FC to win five consecutive Far Eastern Games and in 1936 he became the captain of a Chinese national team, formed for the majority by South China F.C. players, that participated to China’s first Olympic Games in Berlin; they were defeated 2-0 by Great Britain after a well-played match that impressed the foreign media.¹¹⁶ He retired from football in 1947 after 1260 goals scored.¹¹⁷ In 1976 a renowned Federal Republic of Germany’s magazine, when naming the five best players of football history, also included Lee Wai Tong along with stars like Pelé or Di Stefano.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *op cit.*, p. 22.

¹¹⁴ Morris A.D., *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹¹⁵ “Er zhounian zhengqiu da yundong”, *Qinfen tiyu yuebao*, Sep. 1935, quoted in Morris A.D., *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹¹⁶ Chen L.P., “Welcome to the Olympics, commemoration to the king of the football of all generations Li Huitang”, *China Plus* – Chen Liangping 陈浪平, “Huanying aohui, jinian zuqiuqianbei, yidai qiuhang Li Huitang” 《迎奥运, 纪念足球前辈、一代球王李惠堂》, *Guoji zaixian 国际在线*, 25 Jul. 2007. <http://news.cri.cn/gb/1321/2007/07/25/542@1691937.htm>

¹¹⁷ According to reports, there is no certified statistics as proof.

¹¹⁸ Wang X.H., “Li Huitang: China’s world class football king”, *Hong Kong Wen Wei Po* – Wang Xiaohua 王晓华, “Li Huitang: Zhongguo de shijieji qiuhang” 《李惠堂: 中國的世界級球王》, *Xianggang Wenhuibao 香港文匯報*, 15 Mar. 2008. <http://paper.wenweipo.com/2008/03/15/WY0803150001.htm>

2.1.2 Football as a political instrument in the Maoist and post-Maoist era

In the 1930s the sport in China was deeply influenced by the fragmented political situation of a country which was in the middle of a civil war between communists and nationalists and victim of the Japanese invasion. As regards the communist side, they thought sports must be functional for the development of a healthy and competitive body, ready for the next battle, and for this reason every activity related to sports must be purified from any commercial purpose. In the same way, any Western influence must be avoided in the development of sports activities, with the purpose to regain a “sports sovereignty” for the Chinese people.¹¹⁹ The end of the civil war was a watershed moment in China’s sports history, as in all the other aspects. After the victory of the communist side, the nationalists retreated to Taiwan where they established the Republic of China, and in the following years, this dualism between the “two Chinas” created several problems in sports mainly concerning the official recognition by other countries, both by political and sports’ entities, as will be further analyzed later on in the work. In Beijing, on 1 October 1949, Mao Zedong (毛泽东, *Máo Zédōng*) proclaimed the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In its first years the PRC was officially recognized by other socialist countries, especially by the USSR, who played a fundamental role in China’s sports development: for instance, following the USSR model, football was centralized.¹²⁰ After the foundation of the PRC, Mao launched a great campaign for the physical education of the masses. The incentive may have been nationalistic, but it also served to promote ideological and disciplinary training towards collectivity.¹²¹ In this efforts football had a dominant role as it was seen by the political class as an element for the construction of a new China and was therefore considered a symbol of modernity. The intention was clear: modern sport would characterize modern China. The new football championship took place for the first time in December 1951 in Tianjin and it was a mix of the Soviet model and the Chinese Republican period league: it was composed by six teams representing the different geographical areas (North China, South China, East China, North-east China, North-west China and South-west China), the

¹¹⁹ Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *op cit.*, pp. 28-31.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

¹²¹ Chicharro-Saito G., “Physical Education and Moral Embodiment in Primary Schools of the People’s Republic of China”, *China Perspectives*, 1 Jan. 2008, p. 30.

army's team called Ba Yi (八一, *Bāyī*), and a team composed by a railway workers association; the North-east China team obtained the victory. Shortly afterwards, 31 players were selected to form the first National Football Team. By the end of 1952, the National Sports Commission (NSC) was created. It was in charge of the formulation and implementation of sports policy in all its forms and the administration of the national sports program. Thereafter, Chinese football became institutionalized and politicized. All the decision-making power was designed on the basis of a top-down model and, in the early fifties, the sports system was completely under the government rule: Chinese modern football was taking shape.¹²² The problem was that Chinese government wanted to develop football to reach the world's standard in the shortest time possible, for this reason it spared no expenses to reach this scope. The major help came from Hungary, at that time one of the best teams in the world. The national team came to China for a tour and 25 Chinese players were sent to Hungary for one and a half year's training. The reason of this "football fever" was primarily political. In fact, as football was the most played game in the world, building a great football national team could give to the new-born communist government a world stage to exhibit the Chinese march towards modernity.¹²³ In the following years, Chinese teams played a huge amount of international matches that led to a significant development of national football; between 1958 and 1959, China was a football power in Asia and it really seemed about to make the final step to become a world's competitor in the game.¹²⁴ However, all the hopes of Chinese people vanished after the failure of the Great Leap Forward (大跃进, *Dàyuèjìn*). The objective of this economic manoeuvre was to transform China from an agricultural country into a modern and industrialized one in an extremely short span of time. This led to an economic disaster that brought famine all over the country and undermined the social and economic development. Sports also suffered the consequences of this reckless utopian ambition. In order to give new life to the football system, Chinese authorities called for the popularization of football among male teenagers. Mass football became the rule and the athletes' role was to mobilize the masses; Chinese international performances once again picked up, but the worst period in Chinese football history was yet to come.¹²⁵ In the summer of 1966 Chairman Mao launched his last political campaign, the Great

¹²² Dong J.X., Mangan J.A., "Football in the New China: Political Statement, Entrepreneurial Enticement and Patriotic Passion", *Soccer & Society*, Vol.2, No.3, Autumn 2001, pp. 79-80.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹²⁴ Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *op cit.*, pp. 38-39.

¹²⁵ Dong J.X., Mangan J.A., *op. cit.*, p. 82.

Proletarian Cultural Revolution (无产阶级文化大革命, *Wúchǎn jiējí wénhuà dàgémìng*). The Great Helmsman invited the Red Guards to eliminate the Four Olds: Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas. The objective of this giant wave of young people spreading all over Chinese cities was to destroy everything belonging to the past or considered to be bourgeois or capitalist; their first target were intellectuals, professors and functionaries. Whomever was considered suspicious was accused of being Rightist, revisionist or counter-revolutionary and, in the best-case scenario, was sent to the countryside for re-education.¹²⁶ This period of terror obviously affected also the sports' sphere. During the Cultural Revolution, sports development was discontinued, mass sport was eliminated, sports training programs were replaced by political struggle sessions.¹²⁷ Sport was charged with the accuse of fostering capitalistic and bourgeois ideas and every competition and manifestation was frozen for a decade. Even the athletes were directly persecuted and were accused of pursuing the victory of trophies as the sole goal of the sports activity.¹²⁸ The management, training, and competition system was completely abolished in 1967, and most sports teams were dismantled, including forty-seven provincial and municipal football teams. Most training equipment and facilities were destroyed, and stadiums became gathering places for denunciation meetings. Sports competitions were replaced by activities expressing loyalty to Chairman Mao, such as "loyalty dances", which were physical exercises following the rhythms of Mao's quotations.¹²⁹ In 1956, when the Ba Yi lost against a Yugoslav youth team, according to the *People's Liberation Army Daily*, Mao met the Yugoslav side and said: "We lost to you now and perhaps will keep losing for 12 years. But it would be very good to win in the 13th year." By 1969 instead, China was in the middle of the Cultural Revolution and on the brink of a civil war.¹³⁰

As mentioned above, particularly relevant in the Chinese football history of the fifties and sixties is the relationship between the CFA and the international sports governing

¹²⁶ Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *op. cit.*, p. 48.

¹²⁷ Dong-Jhy Hwang, Li-Ke Chang, "Sport, Maoism and the Beijing Olympics. One century, One Ideology", *China Perspectives*, 1 Jan. 2008, p. 12.

¹²⁸ Angelini P., Mamone G., *Il podio celeste. Storia dell'educazione fisica e dello sport in Cina*, Viterbo, Stampa Alternativa, 2008, p. 161.

¹²⁹ Dong-Jhy Hwang, Li-Ke Chang, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹³⁰ "Little red card", *The Economist*, 17 Dec. 2011.

bodies, specifically speaking, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The Chinese National Olympic Committee was officially recognized by the IOC in 1922 while CFA affiliated with FIFA only in 1931. When the issue of the “two Chinas” arose in the early fifties, the situation deteriorated. In 1954, FIFA admitted Taiwan as a member: two Chinas meant two football associations, one representing the PRC, and the other one representing the Republic of China, or Taiwan. Both members claimed to represent Chinese football players, and as FIFA members, each had an equal vote in FIFA’s Congress. In 1956 PRC requested the removal of Taiwan from FIFA, but as its demand was ignored, the PRC officially announced its resignation as a FIFA member in 1958.¹³¹ In the same year, and for the same reasons, the PRC resigned also from the IOC. It was only in 1979 that China and FIFA agreed to reinstate the PRC as a FIFA member on two conditions: the Football Association located in Taipei had to change its name in “The Chinese Taipeh Football Association” and consequently stop using symbols related to the PRC; the re-admission of the Football Association of the People’s Republic of China in accordance with the Article 3 of the FIFA Statutes, which refers to the respect of all internationally recognized human rights.¹³² A similar formula was adopted for the reintegration of China in the IOC. This formula was ratified in 1980, and China was again an official member of both FIFA and the IOC.¹³³

On 9 September of 1976 Mao Zedong died and the frenzy of the Cultural Revolution was finally over. Football, and sports in general, had now the chance to flourish again. The post-Mao era was characterized by the figure of Deng Xiaoping (邓小平, *Dèng Xiǎopíng*) with his innovative reform process started in 1978: the most significant reforms were included in the “Reform and Opening” policy (改革开放, *Gǎigé kāifàng*) and the “Four modernizations” (四个现代化, *sì gè xiàn dài huà*), namely the modernization of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense. The openness towards the rest of the world of this period and the consequent economic growth had a positive effect also on football: the modern sports system was organized on the basis of the Western example and the economic aspect of it was beginning to take on a

¹³¹ Vandenberg L., “History of the People’s Republic of China and FIFA”, in Sullivan J. (ed. by), *China’s Football Dream*, University of Nottingham Press, Nottingham, 2018, p. 102.

¹³² Art. 3, “FIFA Statutes”, issued by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), June 2019 edition.

¹³³ Vandenberg L., *op. cit.*, p. 103.

new significance.¹³⁴ Athletes and coaches were motivated to improve through a series of incentives and economic rewards; starting from 1984 sections of society outside the sports community were encouraged to invest as sponsors.¹³⁵ The Baiyunshan Pharmaceutical Factory, for instance, became the first industrial and commercial enterprise to sponsor a football team, the Guangzhou Soccer Team.¹³⁶ These reforms furthermore allowed the television industry to commercialize, but only under the rigid control of the Party. After this liberalization, China started to acquire the broadcast rights to international TV content and naturally sports were on the priority list. The European super teams and superstars were revealed to the Chinese audience, and the Italian and English leagues quickly became part of the sports schedules at China Central TV (CCTV).¹³⁷ While the economic growth was fast, the results in international matches were still discontinuous. Every time the national team seemed about to obtain an important result, they failed resoundingly. For example, in 1984 the Chinese team was extremely close to an historical result in the Asian Cup, but they lost in final against Saudi Arabia.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, the most important goal to obtain was the qualification to a World Cup, and in order to succeed the Chinese government invested a huge capital in organizing tournaments among teenagers. These competitions stimulated the enthusiasm of children and their parents for football but, however, various problems arose. The most common one was the falsification of players' ages. In fact, as winners were rewarded with bonuses, players were normally older than the age limit prescribed by the competition regulation.¹³⁹ The major issue was that the state only supported elite football, and although tournaments were organized occasionally, there were no amateur football clubs where kids or teenagers could play. According to the rules, all meetings involving groups of ten or more people had to be submitted for approval so, theoretically, even a five-a-side match with a referee was banned. In short, nobody could play organized games unless part of a team inside the elite sports system or part of a work unit team. This was a heavy limitation for a country that wanted to improve its football level from its grassroots.¹⁴⁰ China's "elite sport first" strategy was realized with the famous "Juguo Tizhi" (Whole-Nation system,

¹³⁴ Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *op. cit.*, p. 62.

¹³⁵ Angelini P., Mamone G., *op. cit.*, p. 177.

¹³⁶ Dong J.X., Mangan J.A., *op. cit.*, p. 85.

¹³⁷ Simons R., *op. cit.*, Part 1, Chap. 4.

¹³⁸ Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *op. cit.*, p. 66.

¹³⁹ Dong J.X., Mangan J.A., *op. cit.*, p. 84.

¹⁴⁰ Simons R., *op. cit.*, Part 1, Chap. 1.

举国体制, *jǔguó tǐzhì*), which since 1980 has been applied to promote elite sport. It was based on the professional training and selection system that was officially created in 1963, and it consisted of a well-organized system developed in sports schools. Athletes were selected and trained from a very early age. When boys and girls between the ages of 6 and 9 years old were identified with some talent in sports, they were encouraged to join local sports schools throughout the country on a voluntary basis. After a period of training, young people with potential were selected for the provincial sports academies or training centers. Provincial and local sports teams and commissions took the responsibility of training elite athletes for the national teams and of rewarding them when they won medals. In order to follow the “Juguo Tizhi” strategy, the nation’s limited economic, education and human resources, were channeled into this system, which in the end brought success to the country, especially in the Olympic Games.¹⁴¹

2.1.3 The professionalization of football in China

As mentioned above, in the eighties commercialization began to play an increasing role in the development of Chinese football, and enterprise-run football teams appeared throughout the country. In 1988, professional clubs became a reality. An example is the Liaoning Football Team which, with an investment of RMB 500.000 made by North-east Pharmacy Limited, turned into a professional football club and in 1990 won the Asian Club Championship being the first Chinese football club to become Asian champions.¹⁴² 1992 was a turning point for Chinese Football. On his Southern Tour, Deng Xiaoping wanted to check firsthand the effects of his reforms, besides he encouraged central and local governments to speed up economic reformation at all levels in Chinese society. In November, during a conference held in Zhongshan, Guangdong province, to discuss about sports reformation, the Minister of Sport Wu Shaozu (伍绍祖, *Wǔ Shào zǔ*) pointed out that the main focus of the reform was the transformation of the sports system, which at the time was based on a planned economy, to a new system based on a market economy. On May 24, 1993, the State Physical Culture and Sports Commission (SPCSC) officially announced a socialist market economy-oriented reform policy by issuing the “Suggestion

¹⁴¹ Fan H., Lu Z.X., *China*, in Nicholson M., Hoye R., Houlihan B. (ed. by), *Participation in Sport: International Policy Perspectives*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, pp. 175-176.

¹⁴² Dong J.X., Mangan J.A., *op. cit.*, p. 85.

on Moving Further Ahead in Sports Reformation”. In this document, for the first time, the commercialization of sport and the promotion of sports industry were publicly advocated: sport must be able to generate sufficient funds to support itself. Due to these changes, since the mid-nineties, although elite sport still maintained a dominant position, mass sport and the sports industry, have supported each other and have experienced a rapid growth.¹⁴³ Football was chosen to be the pioneer of this reformation process. In 1992, the CFA held a meeting near Beijing to discuss the methodology of the football reform: a new national football league must be created. As Chinese football authorities had no experience in operating a commercialized and professionalized football league, they sent two delegations to Europe to learn about the professional and youth league systems and the different training programmes for coaches and referees. Taking inspiration from the model of European countries, a double round robin system was adopted, and the new leagues, called Chinese Football Division One League (divided into A league and B league) and Division Two League, were launched in 1994, with 12 teams participating to the first division championship. As the Division Two League was designed to train and produce young talent for the Division One League, foreign players were not allowed to play, and a limit of five players over the age of 25 was applied to all the teams. Sponsorship was introduced to support the championship, resulting in all of the teams being named after their key sponsors; the league adopted as well the name of Marlboro Chinese Football Division One League for sponsorship reasons.¹⁴⁴ As regards the main sponsor of the league, in 1998 Chinese Government legislation introduced a limited ban on tobacco advertising at first division league matches, and therefore the drinks company Pepsi Cola took over the sponsorship from Marlboro and from the 1998-1999 season the league was called the Pepsi Cola National Football Group A League. Pepsi’s sponsorship lasted until 2003, when they abruptly ended their support. The reasons that were most likely to have caused the separation, there were a dispute over the contract with IMG and Pepsi’s greater interest in sponsoring individuals rather than teams. That event left the Chinese football league potentially without a sponsor for the next season until the German communications company Siemens agreed, in March 2003, to

¹⁴³ Fan H., Lu Z.X., 2011, *op. cit.*, pp.176-177.

¹⁴⁴ Fan H., Lu Z.X., “The Professionalisation and Commercialisation of Football in China (1993–2013)”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 30, No. 14, 26 Sep. 2013, pp. 1638-1639.

take over from Pepsi.¹⁴⁵ Earlier in 1993, with the approval of the State Council, a state-owned company called China Football Industry Development Corporation (CFIDC) was established by the Sports Ministry and it was put under the governance of the CFA. The mission of the CFIDC was to function as a marketing agency for the Chinese football league and to facilitate the development of the football market. However, the CFA was not sure about which approach should be adopted towards the marketing and management of the new national league and thus did not rely on the CFIDC for the “first try”. For this reason, the CFA began negotiations with the International Management Group (IMG), one of the world’s leading sports and lifestyle management and marketing companies. Subsequently, a five-year commercial contract worth USD 8.93 million was signed between the CFA and IMG in 1994, making IMG the exclusive marketing agency of the Chinese Football Division One League between 1994 and 1998. As the league was a successful entertainment product at the time, in 1998 IMG decided to extend its contract with the CFA and signed a new five-year contract this time worth USD 89 million, ten times more than the previous deal. The era of commercialization and professionalization of Chinese sport had begun. The 1994 Division One A League (全国足球甲 A 联赛, *Quánguó zúqiú jiǎ A liánsài*) was very successful, attracting 2.17 million spectators. Chinese fans could now cheer for their local teams and going to the stadium became one of the most appreciated activities during the weekends. Profits generated by the box office, advertising, sponsorships, player transfers, television broadcasting rights and other commercial revenues allowed the league to become financially independent. In addition, the success of the league contributed to Chinese football development. In 1992, the number of registered players was less than a thousand and there were only twenty professional teams; by the end of 1998, the numbers of players reached thirty thousand and the teams were three hundred and sixty. The revenues were used by the CFA to promote football at both the elite and grassroots levels. While grassroots level football in the eighties was underdeveloped, due to the boom in the professional football market in the mid-nineties it experienced significant growth. Inspired by star players in the league, more and more school-age boys and girls began to play football in their spare time. Private football schools were also established in order to meet the demand of this booming

¹⁴⁵ Jones R., “Football in the People’s Republic of China”, in Manzenreiter W., Horne J. (ed. by), *Football Goes East. Business, culture and the people’s game in China, Japan and South Korea*, New York and London, Routledge, 2004, p. 61.

market.¹⁴⁶ Anyways, the reform did not modify the organizational structure of football: unlike Western countries, in China the CFA was still under the tight control of government. All the chairmen of the CFA had been high-ranking officials of the Chinese Sports Ministry. All football clubs, players and referees had to register with the CFA and follow its regulations and part of the clubs' income was submitted to the association. In this hierarchical system, clubs were not involved in high-level decision-making process, policy development or strategic planning in relation to the league.¹⁴⁷ Like several other times in the history of Chinese football, when everything seemed to be going for the better, complications, in this case high salaries, poor management, poor performance level and corruption, began to rise. With the booming of the league income, Chinese clubs thought that high profits would last forever, but success is the key to survival, and Chinese football was not obtaining the eagerly awaited results.¹⁴⁸ Many believed that the fast-growing league would enhance Chinese football players' levels of performance and consequently help the national team to reach world-class level in a short period of time. However, a series of defeats in international competitions, like the failed qualification to the 1998 World Cup, soon turned the football fans' passion into resentment.¹⁴⁹ However, while clubs were insufficiently concerned about their commercial situation, they continued to raise the salaries of their footballers. In 1998, the annual income of each Division One A's player was at least RMB 100.000, 20 times the average citizen's income (RMB 5.400), while a league star could earn more than RMB one or two million each year. The issue about high salaries in football was that, compared to other athletes who earned way less money, football players were considered superstars although their performance skills were poor, and the rise of the wages did not go hand in hand with an enhancement of Chinese football level. Moreover, some football players became arrogant and began to verbally abuse their fans, to attack referees and even to break the law. These various problems resulted in public demands to lower footballers' wages.¹⁵⁰ Most of the fans believed that the Chinese football players did not deserve such a high income since their level of performance was so poor compared to professional players in Japan, South Korea and Europe. The CFA then introduced several new regulations in 1996, in an attempt to

¹⁴⁶ Fan H., Lu Z.X., 2013, *op. cit.*, pp. 1639-1641.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1641-1644.

¹⁴⁸ Dong J.X., Mangan J.A., *op. cit.*, p. 86.

¹⁴⁹ Fan H., Lu Z.X., 2013, *op. cit.*, p. 1644.

¹⁵⁰ Dong J.X., Mangan J.A., *op. cit.*, pp. 86-87.

limit the athletes' and coaches' salaries. However, the clubs chose to ignore the regulations.¹⁵¹

At the turn of the 21st century, most of Division A League clubs were at a loss, but investors did not want to leave the football business. Apart from economic reasons, as the future growth of football in China and the visibility their companies could gain in such an international showcase, they kept investing mainly for political reasons. Local governments were deeply involved in football, and companies, investing money in this business, sought to gain support from the authorities. In this precarious economic situation, clubs were attracted to the winning bonuses CFA granted, and consequently bribery and match fixing emerged. Dai Dahong (戴大洪, *Dài Dàhóng*), then manager of Henan Construction revealed the methods to bribe referees. While at the beginning bribery was conducted through invitations for dinner and small gifts, later they began to bribe CFA officials and referees for match fixing with thousands of RMB.¹⁵² This situation emerged in 1998 when a news report entitled “How Black is the Black Whistle?” was published by the *Shenyang Evening Post*, and revealed the level of corruption in the league.¹⁵³ In the Chinese football circle, corrupt refereeing is known as “Black Whistle” (黑哨, *hēi shào*). However, officials and referees were not the only ones accepting bribes since players and coaches were corrupted as well. The most famous case was the one of the football player Sui Bo (隋波, *Suí Bō*), who was publicly accused by his coach of match fixing and forced to leave his club and then to retire from football.¹⁵⁴ In the following years, although fines, suspensions for coaches and players and even police detention, match fixing and bribery continued to corrupt the league. The intervention of judicial authorities was weak, and referees who took bribes were seldom punished legally. From 1998 to 2009, bribing referees was an unspoken rule in China, a football club was forced to bribe the referee if it hoped for the match to be fair, no matter who won, because every club was corrupting referees at the time. Bribing referees has become an unspoken rule for several reasons, like the Chinese custom of social connections to gain favor or

¹⁵¹ Fan H., Lu Z.X., 2013, *op. cit.*, p. 1645.

¹⁵² Huang D., “The third eye sees the “Black Whistle” – A political interpretation of Chinese Football”, *Sohu Sports* – Huang Duan 黄端, “Di san zhi yanjing kan ‘heishao’ – ‘Zhengzhi jiedu’ Zhongguo zuqiu” 《第三只眼睛看“黑哨”--“政治解读”中国足球》, *Sohu Tiyu 搜狐体育*, 19 Apr. 2002. http://sports.sohu.com/79/22/sports_news164342279.shtml

¹⁵³ Fan H., Lu Z.X., 2013, *op. cit.*, p. 1646.

¹⁵⁴ Huang D. – Huang Duan 黄端, *op. cit.*

the competitive structure of Chinese leagues and defective written rules.¹⁵⁵ While the Chinese football league was losing consensus, the national squad finally reached the goal awaited for so long, the qualification to the 2002 World Cup. However, the qualification for the final stage of the World Cup was facilitated by the absence of both Japan and South Korea, who were qualified as hosts of the event. The results were not as good expected, in fact they lost all of the three matches of their first stage group against Brazil, Turkey and Costa Rica without scoring a single goal and conceding nine.¹⁵⁶ Although the first participation to a World Cup appeased the fans' tension for a brief instant, by 2003, the reputation of the league had been completely destroyed by match fixing and bribery scandals. All of a sudden, fans, spectators and the media no longer showed interest in the league. Spectators left the stadia; fans abandoned their clubs with broken hearts and investors and sponsors withdrew their money from the clubs and the league. In 2004, as the Division A League was on the verge of collapse and the reform of 1994 did not bring the expected results, the CFA launched the Chinese Football Association Super League (中国足球协会超级联赛, *Zhōngguó Zúqiú Xiéhuì Chāojí Liánsài*). Unlike the old league, the Chinese Super League (CSL) was disciplined by more detailed regulations and decrees. A club committee was established to manage the league along with the CFA and every club, referee and player was expected to follow the new regulations to avoid match fixing. Nevertheless, this reform did not relieve the situation. The attendance rate continued to decrease while the quality of the matches was not improving and in 2005, when the league remained without a main sponsor for the whole season, many clubs faced financial crises and were forced to cut the players' wages.¹⁵⁷ Although the league was in a dead-end crisis, match-fixing, gambling and corruption did not stop until 2009 when the Minister of Public Security launched an anti-gambling and anti-corruption campaign to tackle such illegal activities. More than 33 important people in the field and more than a dozen football clubs were involved and punished by law, such as the president and vice-presidents and other management staff of the CFA, some referees, coaches, and players as well as some club managers. This clean-up operation was the biggest Anti-Corruption Campaign in China's sports history, and when it was over, it brought back the confidence

¹⁵⁵ Zheng L., Jian D., Bo W., "Bribing Referees: The History of Unspoken Rules in Chinese Professional Football Leagues (1998–2009)", *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 36 No. 4–5, pp. 359-374, 7 May 2019, pp. 368-370.

¹⁵⁶ *FIFA World Cup Archive*,
<https://www.fifa.com/worldcup/archive/koreajapan2002/matches/index.html>.

¹⁵⁷ Fan H., Lu Z.X., 2013, *op. cit.*, pp. 1646-1649.

and the interest of both fans and investors towards the league.¹⁵⁸ Since this campaign was over, Chinese football level kept enhancing year after year, and the prospects for a brighter future in which China would compete on an international stage began to slowly taking shape.

2.2 Institutional framework and shortcomings

As analyzed in the previous paragraph, the professionalization of football in 1994 set the basis for modern football in China. Although the series of laws and regulations introduced since 1992 have the merits of an institutional construction that provided the development of Chinese football with a modern league system and gave the football players the status of pros, the organizational system still suffers some deficiencies, institutional shortcomings, and disorderly management. For instance, problems such as unclear division of profit, uncertain positioning of the rights and responsibilities of the CFA and the clubs, a lack of necessary rules and regulations, and frequent incidents of football fraud and unfair refereeing have resulted in the years in a lag in the evolution of Chinese professional football. The system, for instance, is imported from Western countries, without localizing it according to Chinese features. In Western leagues, a market for professional football grew naturally and the government was never the creator or sponsor for the market. In China, the situation is the opposite: rather than following the public will and democratic procedures, the drafting of rules and regulations is often driven by the government, therefore have often been insufficient. An example of it is how the whole match-fixing case was handled. In Europe or North America when cases like this are exposed, they are investigated by independent judicial institutions whose regulatory powers and investigations are transparent, in order to guarantee a fair investigation to the involved parties and to avoid unfair verdicts.¹⁵⁹ In China, the Sport Law issued in 1995 (and revised in 2009) is the basic legal instrument for Chinese sport. However, it is more a decree to guarantee Chinese people the right to participate in sport

¹⁵⁸ Lin L., Zhang X.Y., Xu Q., “Professional Reform and the Introduction of Foreign Coaches in Chinese Football since 1992: Progress or Stagnation?”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 3 Nov. 2019, p. 6.

¹⁵⁹ Liu H., “The Regulation of Chinese Professional Football: Review and Prospects”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 34 No. 17-18, 2017, pp. 1950-1954.

and to promote its development, rather than a legal provision to regulate and penalize illegal behaviors. Besides, some clauses do not apply to professional football at all. Furthermore, it is also difficult for the judicial authorities to intervene for two reasons: the first is that the CFA holds the exclusive power to solve disputes in Chinese professional football, whereas the second is linked to the ambiguous nature of Chinese football leagues, whether they are state-run organizations or non-government associations, that brings more obstacles in establishing a crime. Consequently, the judicial authorities rarely intervene in match-fixing incidents unless the CFA has taken initial action. In other countries, this is not acceptable because it violates the principle of fairness and there might be economic connections between the league and the teams involved. In fact, only in 2009, when the Ministry of Public Security of China directly intervened in the case and launched a three years long large-scale Anti-Corruption Campaign, the match-fixing problem was definitely solved.¹⁶⁰

All these deficiencies must be analyzed upstream. The whole process that brings to the introduction and implementation of rules and regulations is frequently accompanied by recklessness and superficiality rather than planning and investigation. The main hurdle that the development of Chinese Football is faced with is the urge for quick success and instant benefits. Institutions seek for the fastest way to enhance the performance level, without considering any long-term planning starting from youth football promotion and infrastructure development. In 1993, the CFA created its first “Ten-year Plan”, in which decided the direction of Chinese football in the following ten years. The document made no mention of constructing professional systems, necessary, according to the example of European countries, to develop a professional sport, nor it made any reference to expanding sports engagement among young people. On the contrary, the policy priority was the development of talent at elite level. It was filled with remarks on how to get the China national football team into the World Cup: everything, from competitions’ schedule to the distribution of funds, was intended to be in service of the World Cup and the Olympic Games.¹⁶¹ Although the first “Ten-year Plan” was formulated and initiated by the CFA, it is very probable that the political leaders in the General Administration of Sport (GAS, 国家体育总局, *Guójiā Tǐyù Zǒngjú*) played an important role in the

¹⁶⁰ Huang F., Xiao W., Zhang H., “Not All ‘the Evils of Capitalism’: Match-Fixing and the Governance of Chinese Professional Football, 1994–2016”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 35 No. 2-3, 21 Dec 2018, p. 283.

¹⁶¹ Liu H., *op. cit.*, p. 1953.

decision-making, given the historical intersecting relationship between these two institutions. Basically, the top leaders of the CFA, who also acted as political officials in the GAS, were the policy entrepreneurs that made this reform plan possible.

In 2003, when a new “Ten-year Plan” was formulated, decision-makers within the CFA did not seem to have learned the lessons from the past. There was no significant change in the second “Ten-year Plan”, except that the new policy set unrealistic targets with only small adjustments to the previous reform. At the same time, old problems became more serious and new problems emerged in this new phase of the Chinese football, due to the lack of care by the policymakers. There was also evidence of a frustrated public calling for a more radical reform of the football governance system.¹⁶² In those years, many shortsighted rules and regulations were issued. In 2000, after an amazing season of the Shandong Luneng Yugoslavian goalkeeper Saša Petrović, the CFA prohibited foreign goalkeepers. This rule is still in place to this day, and contrary to the expectations it has generated positive results, although it has some drawbacks as well. By keeping this rule in place, the Chinese FA will have a better chance of developing good goalkeepers for the National Team by playing them in one of Asia’s top leagues, against very good players. Moreover, by developing good keepers, clubs will be able to sell them to the big leagues in Europe. The disadvantage of this rule is that Chinese clubs might not be willing to sell keepers to Europe that easily, given the difficulty to replace them, and that there could be an inflation in price on goalkeepers moving from team to team within China as no one wants to sell a good goalkeeper to a rival. Moreover, a high-level foreign goalkeeper would help the Chinese ones to improve through observation and stimulating competition. All in all, thanks to this rule many good goalkeepers had the chance to show off, as Zeng Cheng (曾诚, *Zēng Chéng*) who was one of Guangzhou Evergrande’s key players in their 2015 Asian Champions League, and it can hopefully give China many great goalkeepers in years to come.¹⁶³ Another absurd decision taken by the CFA was to abolish the promotion and demotion system for the 2001/2002 and 2004/2005 seasons. This regulation led to a complete loss of the league competition and incentive, a decrease of

¹⁶² Peng Q., Skinner J., Houlihan B., “An analysis of the Chinese Football Reform of 2015: why then and not earlier?”, *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 1-18, 2019, p. 9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2018.1536075>

¹⁶³ Bjerkevoll O., “The Chinese Goalkeeper Rule Could Be Vital for China’s Development”, *chinesesuperleague.uk*, 30 May 2017. <https://www.chinesesuperleague.uk/columnist/chinese-goalkeeper-rule-vital-chinas-development/>

matches' performance quality, and to a decreasing interest of fans, while sponsors were reducing their investments. This odd regulation really harmed an upright development of Chinese football. Also in 2002, the CFA drew lots, rather than adopting international practices, to decide the runner-up between Shenzhen and Beijing Guoan.¹⁶⁴

The CFA can be regarded as the principal responsible for all the problems that emerged during these years of professional football. The association has played multiple, and sometimes conflicting roles, as manager, organizer, and operator of the league, and at the same time arbitrator and supervisor. When the CFA has an excessive concentration of power, conflicts between clubs and the association are almost inevitable, leading to a lack of supervision within the CFA itself.¹⁶⁵ In fact, the CFA holds the absolute power and authority over the CSL, leaving the league without any independence or sovereignty. The CFA interferes, sometimes using coercive measures and violating market rules, in the clubs' operative management, causing problems for them to balance their investments and profits. For these reasons, the marketization of the league is making slow progress.¹⁶⁶

Another thorny issue is the relationship between the CFA and the state. In fact, since the professionalization of football, the CFA has always been under the direct control of the government, and this double nature of the CFA, both a state organization and a civilian entity, is one of the reasons why systems have frequently been ineffective. The CFA has always been considered as having the same staff but functioning as a different brand of the Football Management Centre (FMC, 中国足球运动管理中心, *Zhōngguó zúqiú yùndòng guǎnlǐ zhōngxīn*) of the GAS. Both have the same national staff and the same right to exercise the management of Chinese football. This means management power is confused with administrative power and the CFA has the same right to exercise its administrative power as the General Administration of Sport. Over the years, the CFA has become a disguised subordinate unit of the GAS, as its leaders and officials are administrative cadres with no knowledge of football management and economics, or

¹⁶⁴ “The absurd policies and decisions of the Chinese Football Association, *Sohu* – “Zhongguo zuxie de qipa zhengce he jue ding” 《中国足协的奇葩政策和决定》, *Sohu 搜狐*, 3 Jun. 2017. https://www.sohu.com/a/145600713_643490?t=1502453368027

¹⁶⁵ Liu H., *op. cit.*, p. 1955.

¹⁶⁶ Ding H.J., You H.J., “A Research on Management and Operation of the Chinese Super League”, *Journal of Sports Adult Education* – Ding Hongjian 丁宏剑, You Huijun 尤慧君, “Zhongguo zuqiu chaoji liansai yunying guanli yanjiu” 《中国足球超级联赛运营管理研究》, *Tiyu chengren jiaoyu xuekan 体育成人教育* 教育, Vol. 34, 19 Oct. 2018.

specific ability to manage the football industry. The CFA exercises national administrative power in accordance with national laws, but there are obvious problems in this organization. Being a link between government and citizens, the association must assume responsibility for management of football matches but it must also have the specific authorization of laws and regulations. The problem is that the authorization rules of the Sports Law are too vague and lack concrete explanation.¹⁶⁷ Article 31 of the Sports Law stipulates that the state exercises a classified management of sports competitions. National comprehensive games shall be administered by the Sports Administration Department of the State Council, on its own or in conjunction with the relevant organizations. National individual sports competitions shall be administered by the corresponding national association. The administration of local comprehensive games and local individual sports competitions shall be administered by the local government. Article 49 states that those who violate sporting rules are to be penalized by the social sports association in accordance with the constitution.¹⁶⁸ Essentially, these inexact rules give the CFA full discretion to manage football matches nationally.

CFA participation in the market has been troubled as well, primarily because of the influence of the traditional planned economy which sought to control the market. The CFA should supervise market activities according to laws and regulations. It does not need to be responsible for the specific activities of the professional football market, which are under the control of market management mechanisms. Its objective is to improve this market mechanisms, rather than to intervene in the market itself. CFA participation in the market should be reduced: the association should maintain market fairness through strict law enforcement rather than acting as the market master and using the market to serve the administrative agencies.¹⁶⁹

In essence, a complete and effective system of rules and regulations is of extreme importance to a healthy and sustainable development of professional football and great importance should be given to high-level legislation. In order to establish a system of rules and regulations for professional sports, the deficiencies in sports legislation need to be filled. Considering the problems facing Chinese professional football, it is of utmost

¹⁶⁷ Liu H., *op. cit.*, p. 1956.

¹⁶⁸ Art. 31; Art. 49 of the “Sports Law of the People’s Republic of China” (“Zhongguo renmin gongheguo tiyufa” 《中华人民共和国体育法》), issued by the General Administration of Sport (Guojia tiyu zongju 国家体育总局) on August the 29th, 1995, revised on August the 27th, 2009.

¹⁶⁹ Liu H., *op. cit.*, p. 1958.

importance to promulgate laws regarding issues such as club property rights, player transfers, television broadcast rights, and the status of the CFA. The purpose of this is to ensure that there is a law for any professional football management behavior. In fact, imperfect regulation cannot efficiently stop negative behavior and self-supervision also appears to be useless if the problem is internal corruption. This means that in order to ensure a healthy development of professional football, regulatory agencies should be independently established, judicial intervention should be brought in, and the behavior of management personnel and participants in the league should be constrained, leading to management based on rules, order, and responsibility. The “rule of law” has to replace the “rule of man”. Although it has been more than 20 years since the introduction of professional football in China, several non-professional behaviors still remain. All participants in the professional league are expected to have the right sporting attitude, professional ethics, and self-discipline. Furthermore, the CFA should upgrade its management norms and improve the professional quality of all the staff.¹⁷⁰ The economic efficiency of the Chinese Super League is extremely low. The league’s main sources of profit are ticket sales, the sale of broadcasting rights, advertisement, and sponsorship which at the moment, due to a poor overall level of competition of the Chinese league, its lack of attractiveness of the league, and the overall low degree of interest towards Chinese football, are insufficient. A professional league as the Chinese one, should not only make profits on regular income, but also pay attention to sustainable development, as the world’s major leagues do. Good business development can create huge economic benefits, which can be reinvested into the football league, creating a virtuous circle.¹⁷¹

2.2.1 Xi Jinping’s football dream: the 2015 Reform Plan and the use of football as an instrument of soft-power

After the success of 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the government started to understand the importance of sports in the international contest. As a result, the then President Hu Jintao (胡锦涛, *Hú Jǐntāo*) demanded further actions in order to fulfill China’s sports policy goal of going “from a major sports country to a world’s sports

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 1958-1961.

¹⁷¹ Ding H.J., You H.J., Ding Honjian 丁宏剑, You Huijun 尤慧君, *op. cit.*

power”. Football, as the world’s most popular sport and as one of the few sports in which China did not obtain any success in years, was considered as a priority in the new sports development policy. By July 2009, the Chinese football team’s ranked 108th worldwide and 13th in Asia according to FIFA, which was a record low point. Hu’s successor, Xi Jinping (习近平, *Xí Jìnpíng*), is a huge football fan, in fact during his youth he was in the football team of his high school and liked to watch football games.¹⁷² According to reports, during an official visit to Germany in 2009 the then vice president Xi Jinping pointed out that China has first-class fans and a considerable market for football, but the current level was relatively low. He declared: “After the Beijing Olympic Games, China has made a resolution: it may take long, but we will be determined to develop Chinese football, for we had won gold medals in most other sports”.¹⁷³ His affection for the sport did not end when he became the leader of China; as a matter of fact, he intensified Hu’s work by making football development one of his major policies and has put continuous efforts towards this objective. In an official meeting with the president of the Korea Democratic Party in 2011, Xi had highlighted his three “World Cup dreams”: participating again in a World Cup, hosting a World Cup, and winning a World Cup. In light of China’s leaders’ concerns about the future of the country’s football situation, many aspects were immediately improved. First of all, the once-neglected “campus football” attracted increased attention; then private corporations have echoed Xi’s proclamations by starting to support the development of football in China. Meanwhile, the government promised to speed up the reform of the football administration system in China.¹⁷⁴ Every football related authority supported Xi’s Chinese football dream. During an interview held in 2010, Xu Jiali (徐家力, *Xú Jiālì*), at the time deputy chief and spokesperson of the Chinese Football Association disciplinary committee, as well pointed out many of the problems affecting Chinese football. He affirmed that supervision in Chinese football industry is weak and that football should be managed by using the legal system. He called for a reform of the entire football system, especially in terms of management and

¹⁷² Tan T.C., Huang H.C., Bairner A., Chen Y.W., “Xi Jin-Ping’s World Cup Dreams: From a Major Sports Country to a World Sports Power”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 33 No. 12, 2016, pp. 1449-1450.

¹⁷³ Lu Y., “The recent concerns expressed by Chinese top officials on football development are worthy of attention”, *China News*, - Lu Yan 卢岩, “Zhongguo gaoceng jinqi lianxu jiu zuqiu yundong fazhan biaotai zhide guanzhu” 《中国高层近期连续就足球运动发展表态值得关注》, *Zhongxin wang 中新网*, 15 Oct. 2009. <http://www.chinanews.com/ty/ty-gnzq/news/2009/10-15/1912040.shtml>

¹⁷⁴ Tan T.C., Huang H.C., Bairner A., Chen Y.W., *op. cit.*, p. 1456.

administration. As a starting point, he took as an example the United States or European countries, where football associations are completely non-governmental organizations in which the composition of the association, the drafting of regulations and the election of the leaders are established by the participating clubs on an equal basis. On the contrary, the CFA has always had this “dual identity” which, in the years, has not guaranteed fairness and justice in the league. His proposal is that, first of all, professional football should be managed following a market-oriented model, and as a supervisory organization, the CFA should draw a clear line between politics and business. Secondly, laws should be made specifically for Chinese football, and more detailed rules and regulations should be formulated. Thirdly, supervisory systems need to be rebuilt, and supervision needs to be strengthened. Ultimately, industry self-discipline and regulatory awareness need to be improved. As a final prediction, he said that for this process to be effective should pass at least from five to ten years. Besides, and he advocated that for the new round of reform, authorities should start from system, legislation, supervision, and industry self-discipline, only in this way Chinese football will undertake a healthy and vital development path.¹⁷⁵

The turning point was June 15, 2013, when the Chinese national team was defeated 1-5 by Thailand in a friendly match, a result that was mocked by the media and by fans because of the opponent’s team modesty. It had been one of the most humiliating days in the history of Chinese football and in order to prevent a further decline, several policies were proposed, aimed at gradually fulfilling the three World Cup dreams announced by President Xi. According to Chinese scholars, the failure of the Chinese national team reinforced Xi’s determination to initiate overall reform.¹⁷⁶ First of all, there was a financial issue to solve. Xi knew that the State did not have the economic strength to fund his project, for this reason he invoked the help of China’s most important entrepreneurs - such as Dalian Wanda Group CEO Wang Jianlin (王健林, *Wáng Jiàn lín*) and Evergrande

¹⁷⁵ Du X., Ren X., “Reporters dialogue with CFA spokesperson on Chinese football strategies to pass from ‘rule of man’ to ‘rule of law’”, *Legal Daily* – Du Xiao 杜晓, Ren Xue 任雪, “Jizhe duihua zuxie faxinren tan Zhongguozuqiu ruhe cong renzhi zouxiang fazhi” 《记者对话足协发言人谈中国足球如何从人治走向法治》, *Fazhi ribao 法制日报*, 26 Apr. 2010. <http://news.163.com/10/0426/14/6572149900014AEE.html>

¹⁷⁶ “National team defeat against Thailand by 1-5 tears off the last cover of Chinese football”, *China News* – “Guozu canbai Taiguo 1:5 sidiao Zhongguo zuqiu zuihou yi kuai zhexiubu” 《国足惨败泰国 1:5 撕掉中国足球最后一块遮羞布》, *Zhongxin wang 中新网*, 16 Jun. 2013. <http://hunan.voc.com.cn/article/201306/201306161513127169.html>

Real Estate Group board chairperson Xu Jiayin (许家印, *Xǔ Jiāyìn*) - as will be examined in the paragraph below. He strengthened the “inviting in and sending out” policy which involved government agencies (such as the CFA) and the above-mentioned business stakeholders. As for “inviting in”, the main purpose was to introduce high-level foreign experts to provide training for Chinese coaches, referees, and instructors. The “sending out” element refers to encouraging football clubs, corporations, and other social forces to select professional and young players to participate in training in countries excelling in football so as to aspire to play in their high-level professional leagues.¹⁷⁷ In 2013 a comprehensive investigation into the status quo of football in China was carried out by the CFA. The objective of the investigation was to understand the reasons why Chinese football had not made significant progress despite all the efforts in the past twenty years, and the problem was identified in the inappropriate institutional system.¹⁷⁸ On the basis of the investigation, President Xi Jinping and his administration as well as the top leaders in the CFA acted as policy entrepreneurs in the initiation of the reform process. Focused on sports development in general and not specifically on football, an initial policy, called the “State Council’s opinions on accelerating the development of the sports industry and promoting sports consumption” (国务院关于加快发展体育产业促进体育消费的若干意见, *Guówùyuàn guānyú jiākuài fāzhǎn tǐyù chǎnyè cùjìn tǐyù xiāofèi de ruògān yìjiàn*), was issued by the State Council (国务院, *Guówùyuàn*) on October the 2nd, 2014. The main purpose of these policy was to promote the fitness to all the people, to expand domestic demand and supply of sports products and services, and to foster new field of economic growth. The ambitious goals of this reform were to surpass RMB 5 trillion overall value of the sports industry by 2025, to have 500 million people who regularly participate in sports activities by 2025, and a 100% coverage of new neighborhoods with sports facilities.¹⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the most important and ambitious reform program since the professionalization of football is the “Overall plan for Chinese football reform and development” (中国足球改革发展总体方案, *Zhōngguó zúqiú gǎigé fāzhǎn zǒngtǐ fāng'àn*) (from now on Reform Plan) issued by the Chinese State Council on March 8,

¹⁷⁷ Tan T.C., Huang H.C., Bairner A., Chen Y.W., *op. cit.*, p. 1454.

¹⁷⁸ Peng Q., Skinner J., Houlihan B., *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁷⁹ “State Council’s opinions on accelerating the development of the sports industry and promoting sports consumption” (“Guowuyuan guanyu jiakuai fazhan tiyu chanye cujin tiyu xiaofei de ruogan yijian” 《国务院关于加快发展体育产业促进体育消费的若干意见》) issued by the State Council (Guowuyuan 国务院) on October 2, 2014.

2015. The plan is organized in eleven sections for a total of fifty points. The second section is about the adjustment and reform of the CFA in all its aspects, from the structure to the management system and leadership. Of particular importance is the fifth point of this section, in which is stated that: «the Chinese Football Association must be reorganized according to the principles of separation between government and society, transparency of power and responsibilities, and legal autonomy. The purpose is the transformation of the old organizational structure under which the Chinese Football Association and the Football Management Center of the General Administration of Sport were two different branches sharing the same staff. With the decoupling of the CFA from the GAS, the football association has the sovereignty on the internal structure organization, the drafting of working plans, financial and compensation management, human resources management, and the international professional exchange».¹⁸⁰ The decoupling of the CFA from the GAS had become official on the 5th of January 2017 when the Football Management Center was definitely cancelled, and the Chinese Football organizational structure of “two brands and one staff” (两块牌子、一套人马, *liǎng kuài páizi, yī tào rén mǎ*) had become history. In February 2016, the FMC had already been repealed, but the official announcement only arrived almost a year after. Now the CFA is officially no longer part of the GAS, which is a big step forward. In the next few years, the CFA should accomplish the conversion between its identity and its role as soon as possible, to properly organize domestic football and to strengthen the interests of all stakeholders in professional football.¹⁸¹ Although the reform claims to have brought a separation of the CFA from the government, the ninth point of the second section, is quite ambiguous: «it aims to strengthen the organizational structure of the party in football associations at all levels. Proceed in accordance with the principles of the party cadres and the personnel policy of the party. Strengthen the association ideology, the political work and the daily management of cadres. The CFA establishes a party committee and is

¹⁸⁰ “Overall plan for Chinese football reform and development” (“Zhongguo zuqiu gaige fazhan zongti fang’an” 《中国足球改革发展总体方案》), issued by the State Council (Guowuyuan 国务院) on March 8, 2015.

¹⁸¹ Zhou J.J., “Football Management Center of the General Administration of Sport of China was officially dismissed”, *Xinhua Net* – Zhou Jingjie 周靖杰, “Guojia tiyu zongju zuqiu yundong guanli zhongxin zhengshi zhuxiao 《国家体育总局足球运动管理中心正式注销》”, *Xinhua wang 新华网*, 6 Jan. 2017. http://www.xinhuanet.com/sports/2017-01/06/c_1120261045.htm

led by the party group of the GAS». ¹⁸² This last point conveys a certain dose contradiction and perplexity about which will be the future role of the party-state in the process of development of Chinese football. At the moment, it is unlikely to think of a future in which the government will completely retreat from an industry, such the football one, which interests are bonded to the entire nation. ¹⁸³ Essentially, albeit the 2015 “Reform Plan” was promoted as the Chinese government letting go of the control of football development, the fact that the former President of the CFA, Cai Zhenhua (蔡振华, *Cài Zhènhuá*) held the deputy director position in the GAS, and one of the actual vice presidents, Du Zhaocai (杜兆才, *Dù Zhàocái*), serves as deputy minister of the GAS, raises questions whether the change occurring is still superficial, and whether decentralization will actually occur, or a centralized control will continue. At the moment, government interference is still strong and the CFA, the Chinese Super League Company (CSLC) and the CSL are still unable to release themselves from the leadership and governance of the Communist Party. ¹⁸⁴

The “Reform Plan” deals with many other aspects of professional football. Apart from the separation between the CFA and the government, it was radical in other two ways. First, it recognized the importance of developing football at all levels. For a long time, youth football development in China had been dominated by the pursuit of elite sports success. In the “Reform Plan” instead, it is explicitly stated the aim to have a significant increase in youth football participation as a mid-term goal. Second, for the first time in Chinese history, football development is prioritized as part of a national strategy. ¹⁸⁵ The objectives of the reform are programmed to be fulfilled with the implementation of a “three steps strategy”: a short-term goal, which aims to improve the environment and atmosphere for the development of football, innovate a football management model with Chinese characteristics, and enhance the coordination between the institutions and the football industry; a mid-term goal, which includes, as mentioned above, the promotion of youth football, as well as the improvement of the league, of the national team, which have to be ranked among the top in Asia, and of the women’s team, which have to return to be

¹⁸² “Overall plan for Chinese football reform and development” (“Zhongguo zuqiu gaige fazhan zongti fang’an” 《中国足球改革发展总体方案》), issued by the State Council (Guowuyuan 国务院) on March 8, 2015.

¹⁸³ Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *op. cit.*, pp. 97-98.

¹⁸⁴ Peng Q., Skinner J., Houlihan B., *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁸⁵ Peng Q., Skinner J., Houlihan B., *op. cit.*, p. 2.

ranked among the world's top teams; a long-term goal, which aims to the realization of a comprehensive development of Chinese football, in which football has become a popular sport for the masses, and a healthy football culture is formed in the whole society; the national men's football and the professional league have a significant international competitiveness; actively bid for the FIFA Men's World Cup.¹⁸⁶ In regard to this last topic, in recent years many media reported news about the possibility for China to bid for the 2030 World Cup. In 2018 the media even quoted sources as saying that China will officially announce the bid for the 2030 World Cup during the visit of FIFA President Gianni Infantino in May 2019. The association in response stated that this news was "purely fabricated". In addition, according to FIFA rules, the AFC cannot host the 2030 World Cup because it is too close in time to Qatar 2022. It is more likely that China's real goal is to obtain the rights to host the 2034 World Cup.¹⁸⁷ All in all, the "Reform Plan", is extremely wide and articulated, it examines every aspects of Chinese Football proposing innovative solutions. Nonetheless, in the eyes of someone who is not familiar with the Chinese context, this document can appear as a sort of slogan without substance, which proposes great solutions without analyzing the method for their implementation. However, this consideration does not contemplate many factors. First of all, documents in China are not handbooks through which policies are implemented, are more like a symbol to justify something that has been already decided and is already in process. Secondly, it is important to underline that the strategy of the central government does not stop with this reform. The outbreak that the CSL is living in these years, measures all the efforts the government is doing to fulfill its dreams in this industry. The objective is to make the CSL a staple of the sports industry, in order to enlarge both the interest of the public and the business aspect.¹⁸⁸

As a follow-up to this reform, on the 6 of April 2016 was unveiled by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC, 国家发展和改革委员会, *Guójiā*

¹⁸⁶ "Overall plan for Chinese football reform and development" ("Zhongguo zuqiu gaige fazhan zongti fang'an" 《中国足球改革发展总体方案》), issued by the State Council (Guowuyuan 国务院) on March 8, 2015.

¹⁸⁷ Gong B., Zheng D.J., "Chinese Football Association: the report that China will bid for 2030 World Cup is 'purely fabricated'", *Xinhua Net* – Gong Bing 公兵, Zheng Daojin 郑道锦, "Zhongguo zuxie: Zhongguo jiang shenban 2030 nian shijiebei baodao 'chun shu du zhuan'" 《中国足协：中国将申办 2030 年世界杯报道“纯属杜撰”》，*Xinhua wang 新华网*, 15 Nov. 2018.

¹⁸⁸ Bagozzi M., Bisceglia A., *op. cit.*, pp. 101-103.

Fāzhǎn hé Gǎigé Wěiyuánhùi) “The Medium and Long-Term Development Plan for Chinese Football (2016-2050)” (中国足球中长期发展规划(2016—2050年), *Zhōngguó zúqiú zhōng cháng qī fāzhǎn guīhuà*). In this plan, the Chinese government emphasizes the three stages to become a world top competitor already mentioned in the “Reform Plan”. In the short-term, from 2016 to 2020, the plan is to establish twenty thousand specialized football schools, more than seventy thousand football fields so that for every ten thousand people there will be 0,5-0,7 pitches available, and it is estimated that more than thirty million primary and secondary students will be practicing the sport and more than fifty million people will frequently participate in football. In the mid-term, from 2021 to 2030, the number of specialized football schools will arrive to fifty thousand, and every ten thousand people will have one football pitch available; laws and regulations will be improved; the Chinese men’s team will become one of the best in Asia, and the women’s team will return among the world’s top teams. In the long-term, from 2031 to 2050, the objective is to become one of the leading football powers and achieve a comprehensive development of Chinese football.¹⁸⁹ Basically, Chinese government realized that in order to get to the top of the football world, is fundamental to popularize the sport: more people practicing football in the country, especially young people, so that it is possible to select the best athletes to be competitive in international competitions. This plan aims to create a football culture among Chinese people by promoting the strengthening of grassroots football and community football, talent training, increasing the number of youth participation in football, developing football schools to promote interest and cultivating fans. That is also why this document gives special attention to the Chinese educational system. To increase the scale of football participation among teenagers, the plan establishes that football must be included to the teaching content of physical education classes. Moreover, there must be an improvement of the level of physical education teachers and an increase of the number of teachers specialized in football.¹⁹⁰ In the years following the publication of this document, according to the *People’s Daily*, Chinese sports authorities have raised the ante in order to accelerate

¹⁸⁹ “The Medium and Long-Term Development Plan for Chinese Football (2016-2050)” (“Zhongguo zuqiu zhongchangqi fazhan guihua (2016-2050 nian)” 《中国足球中长期发展规划 (2016—2050年)》), issued by the National Development and Reform Commission (Guojia fazhan he gaige weiyuanhui 国家发展和改革委员会) on April 6, 2016.

¹⁹⁰ Leite Júnior E.F., Rodrigues C., “The Chinese football development plan: soft power and national identity”, *Holos*, Vol. 5, 2017, p. 117.

football development: instead of fifty thousand football schools until 2030, Chinese authorities raised the bar to 2025. Improving Chinese football is no longer a dream, the Reform Plan laid the foundations for a definitive development.¹⁹¹

All of the political reform measures to develop Chinese football are associated with President Xi Jinping's leadership. For instance, "The overall plan for Chinese football reform and development" begins with the following words: «Since the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as its General Secretary has placed the rejuvenation of football as an important task for the development of sports and the construction of a powerful sports nation on the agenda». ¹⁹² It is, however, unlikely that the PRC's central government has been implementing reform programs at a national level just because the president passion for football. That said, neither the media nor the scholars have so far come up with a precise explanation for why exactly the development of national football is now so actively promoted by China's central government. There are many reasons to explain this sudden convergence of an enormous amount of resources towards the football development goal. The most accredited explanation is related to political development concepts such as the "Chinese Dream" (中国梦, *Zhōngguó mèng*), promoted in a number of presidential speeches since Xi Jinping's election, and "soft power", which are strictly related to national economic interests. ¹⁹³ According to the Reform Plan, the reforms were introduced for three reasons: to meet the new expectations of the people, to improve the image of Chinese sports and to realize the dream of becoming a powerful sports nation (实现体育强国梦, *Shíxiàn tǐyù qiángguó mèng*). ¹⁹⁴ This refers explicitly to the key concept of the "Chinese Dream", which, in contrast to the "American Dream", is not mainly about the economic comfort of an individual or, generally, of the middle class but

¹⁹¹ "China to build 50,000 football schools by 2025", *People's Daily*, 22 Feb. 2017 <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0222/c90000-9181128.html>

¹⁹² "Overall plan for Chinese football reform and development" ("Zhongguo zuqiu gaige fazhan zongti fang'an" 《中国足球改革发展总体方案》), issued by the State Council (Guowuyuan 国务院) on March 8, 2015.

¹⁹³ Gündoğan, I., Sonntag A., "Chinese Football in the Era of Xi Jinping: What do Supporters Think?", *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 47 No. 1, 2018, pp. 107-108.

¹⁹⁴ "Overall plan for Chinese football reform and development" ("Zhongguo zuqiu gaige fazhan zongti fang'an" 《中国足球改革发展总体方案》), issued by the State Council (Guowuyuan 国务院) on March 8, 2015.

also has strongly nationalistic characteristics, is the dream of the entire nation. In place of the individualism associated with the American dream, Xi Jinping has shown himself to be much more concerned with integrating the state, the people and the individual, making a rich and powerful country, revitalizing the nation and enhancing the well-being of the people.¹⁹⁵ In addition, according to the president himself, “the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history”, for the country to regain its place in the pantheon of global leadership.¹⁹⁶ Football, recognized as the most global of games, appears to be perceived by Chinese policymakers as one element in this comprehensive rejuvenation process and as an important element to affirm China’s power in the global context. This element refers to the concept of “soft power”.¹⁹⁷ Sports can be a very useful tool in the exercise of “soft power”, and in Chinese contemporary history there have been many examples of it such as the “ping pong diplomacy”, which allowed the rapprochement with the United States in the early seventies, or the recent organization of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. In fact, hosting Beijing 2008 Olympic Games allowed China to show the world their development and enabled the country to stand as a world power, giving the image of a highly modern nation, efficient and increasingly prosperous.¹⁹⁸ This demonstration of economic, technological and cultural strength is related to Xi Jinping’s “dream” to see his country hosting the biggest competition of the most popular sport on the planet: the FIFA World Cup. It would be the perfect opportunity to reaffirm the position of the country as a global power in the international arena. Besides, of course, to put the country once again in the eyes of foreign investors, business partners, tourists and other

¹⁹⁵ Ferdinand P., “Westward ho—the China dream and ‘one belt, one road’: Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 92 No. 4, 2016, pp. 946-948.

¹⁹⁶ “General Secretary Xi Jinping explains the ‘Chinese Dream’”, *Xinhua Net* – “Xi Jinping zong shuji shenqing chanshu ‘Zhongguo meng’” 《习近平总书记深情阐述“中国梦”》, *Xinhua wang 新华网*, 30 Nov. 2012. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-11/30/c_124026690.htm

¹⁹⁷ In contrast to the “hard power” of coercion (military force) or payment (economic strength), which are able to make others change their position, Joseph Nye conceptualized that results can be obtained without having to resort to threats or financial exchanges. This is what he called “soft power”, to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction and persuasion, the power of seduction over the other. A country can get the results wanted in international politics because other countries admire its values, emulate its example and aspire to its level of prosperity, and consequently will want to follow it. Nye J.S., *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*, PublicAffairs, New York, 2005.

¹⁹⁸ Giulianotti R., “The Beijing 2008 Olympics: Examining the Interrelations of China, Globalization, and Soft Power”, *European Review*, Vol. 23 No. 2, 2015, pp. 289-291.

consumers.¹⁹⁹ Speaking of diplomacy, international relations and foreign trade, the Chinese football development plan can also serve as a way to bring the country closer to trading partners. For instance, British professor of Sports Enterprise at Salford University and researcher Simon Chadwick raises the question whether if China's football strategy is indeed about the sport itself.²⁰⁰ He draws attention regarding a possible alliance between China and Iran in the sports field, as a part of the Belt and Road Initiative.²⁰¹ A concrete example of the influence of football in Chinese politics is the acquisition of a stake in the company that owns Manchester City. First of all, in 2014 China signed a major oil and gas agreement with Abu Dhabi, the capital city of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE is a strategic partner to China, since the country is close to both overland and maritime Belt and Road routes. In October 2015 is when football became a part of the deal. In fact, Xi Jinping visited the United Kingdom and during his stay in Manchester, Xi went to the training center of Manchester City, a club owned by City Football Group, which belongs to Abu Dhabi United Group. Two months later, in December 1, 2015, group of Chinese investors, headed by China Media Capital, acquired a 13% stake in the company that owns Manchester City football club for USD 400 million. Two weeks after, during the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Shaikh Mohammad Bin Zayed, state visit to China, it was launched a UAE-China joint strategic investment fund worth USD 10 billion. In the end, last February 2019, City Football Group bought the China League Two (third tier of Chinese football) football club Sichuan Jiuniu F.C., which is based in Chengdu, Sichuan, China. A few days before that acquisition, Abu Dhabi's Etihad Airways announced a new fleet of Boeing 787's to service its routes into

¹⁹⁹ Leite Júnior E.F., Rodrigues C., 2017, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

²⁰⁰ Chadwick S., "How One Belt, One Road is guiding China's football strategy", *South China Morning Post*, 10 Nov. 2016. <https://www.scmp.com/sport/soccer/article/2044812/how-one-belt-one-road-guiding-chinas-football-strategy>

²⁰¹ China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, known in Chinese as 一带一路, *yī dài yī lù*) is an ambitious programme to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime networks along six corridors with the aim of improving regional integration, increasing trade, and stimulating economic growth. The name was coined in 2013 by Xi Jinping, who drew inspiration from the concept of the Silk Road established during the Han Dynasty. The BRI has also been referred to in the past as "One Belt One Road". The initiative defines five major priorities: policy coordination; infrastructure connectivity; unimpeded trade; financial integration; and connecting people. The programme is expected to involve over USD 1 trillion in investments, largely in infrastructure development for ports, roads, railways and airports, as well as power plants and telecommunications networks. The BRI's geographical scope is constantly expanding. So far it covers over 70 countries. <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html>

Chengdu.²⁰² Investments made by Chinese entrepreneurs in European football will be further discussed in the paragraph 2.3.1.

2.3 The management of football clubs and players in the Chinese Super League

2.3.1 Chinese Super League football clubs: the appearance of new investors in Chinese football panorama, the restrictions imposed by the CFA, and the struggle for independence

In the early years of football professionalization, football clubs competing in the league were divided into four categories according to their ownership status: privately owned, collectively owned, state-owned and joint ventures. Privately owned clubs' investors are private companies and are owned by shareholders. Each club is headed by a board of directors and managed by a professional management team and a coaching team. All the players, coaches, managers and other staff members are employees of the club. Collectively owned clubs are similar to the privately owned ones, but they are created and funded by state-owned companies. State-owned clubs are invested in by provincial or municipal governments. These clubs are jointly governed by local governments and local sports commissions, and they are normally sponsored by local companies. In the end, joint venture clubs are jointly invested in by local governments and private or state-owned companies. Like privately owned clubs, they are administered by a board of directors and managed by professional management teams. Beijing Guoan at the time was an example of this type of club. The ownership status of the clubs reflected the nature of China's state-run sport system. When the league was launched in 1994, most of the clubs were state-owned or joint ventures, hence funded and operated by local governments. This reflected the fact that the state played a dominant role in the professional sports market. The real commercialization of Chinese football started with

²⁰² Leite Júnior E.F., Rodrigues C., *Belt, Road and Ball: Football as a Chinese Soft Power and Public Diplomacy Tool*, in Leandro, F.B.S.J., Duarte P.A.B. (ed. by), *The Belt and Road Initiative: An Old Archetype of a New Development Model*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 70.

the rise of privately owned and collectively owned clubs, beginning with the transformation of the ownership status of some major state-owned clubs. Shanghai Shenhua and Dalian Wanda were the first two clubs to gain independence from the local governments. Shanghai Shenhua was released from the Shanghai Sports Bureau and became a collectively owned club in 1994. Following the example, Dalian Wanda became China's first privately owned professional football club in 1995. In the following years, the amount of privately owned and collectively owned clubs continued to grow. By 2012, the league was dominated by privately owned clubs.²⁰³

Corporate governance is the core of modern enterprise system construction. In the "Reform and improve the construction and operation model of professional football clubs" section of the 2015 Reform Plan, was proposed to optimize the clubs' equity and legal structure to accelerate the construction of a modern corporate governance system. With the corporatization of Chinese professional football clubs, the clubs have presented important characteristics such as a diversified shareholding structure and a separation of ownership and managerial authority. China's professional clubs still have prominent problems such as inadequate corporate governance structures, defective internal and external governance mechanisms, increasing irrational investments that lead to financial deficits because expenditures exceeded the income. For these reasons, corporate governance should be further improved. An example of efficient corporate governance is Guangzhou Evergrande Taobao Football Club, which was listed in the national stock transfer system for small and medium enterprises, becoming the first professional football club in Asia to access the capital market. The innovation and development of corporate governance laid the foundation for independent financing, independent operation and improving performance. As a matter of fact, the innovative management of the club led to impressive results in the field.²⁰⁴ In 2019, Guangzhou Evergrande Taobao won the eight CSL title in the last nine years, plus two AFC Champions league in 2013 and in 2015, becoming one of the most influential professional football club in Asia.

²⁰³ Fan H., Lu Z.X., 2013, *op. cit.*, pp. 1643-1644.

²⁰⁴ Zhang X.Y., Zhang R.L., "Corporate Governance of Professional Football Clubs in China: an example of Guangzhou Evergrande Taobao Football Club Co., Ltd.", *Journal of Shanghai University of Sport*,—Zhang Xinying 张新英, Zhang Ruilin 张瑞林, "Woguo zhiye zuqiu julebu gongsi zhili yanjiu – yi Guangzhou Hengda Taobao zuqiu julebu gufen youxian gongsi wei" 《我国职业足球俱乐部公司治理研究—以广州恒大淘宝足球俱乐部股份有限公司为例》, *Shanghai tiyu xueyuan xuebao 上海体育学院学报*, Vol. 41 No. 6, pp. 28-33, 20 Nov. 2017, p. 28.

In the last ten years, private investors, encouraged by the authorities, started to invest deeply in the football industry. Professional football development and investments in the grassroots require substantial sums of money, and there has been a collaborative effort to share the financial burden with private business. For example, the CEO of commercial property developer and mall operator Dalian Wanda Group as well as one China's richest entrepreneurs, Wang Jianlin (王健林, *Wáng Jiàn lín*) agreed to a strategic partnership with the CFA with a RMB 500 million investment that consists of six elements – selecting youths under sixteen for training at top European football clubs, financing three national youth football leagues with athletes aged from ten to seventeen, introducing world-class foreign head coaches to lead the national team without a salary cap, becoming the name sponsor for CSL, exploring and reforming the current system of assessment and rewarding for referees, and funding the national women's football team.²⁰⁵ Wang is a former Dalian government official and a veteran of the People's Liberation Army. He began his investment in football during the early stages of professionalization when he led Dalian Wanda to win four of the first five Division A League titles between 1994 and 1999. Wang sold the club in 2000, when the league was declining and suffering from corruption scandals, and vowed never to have anything to do with Chinese soccer again.²⁰⁶ In the end, he returned in 2011 due to, as he said, “Xi's direction, social demand and my passion”. After his return, aside from investing domestically for Chinese football development, he emerged as a key investor also in the international panorama. In 2015, Wanda purchased from the European private equity firm Bridgepoint for approximately EUR 1.05 billion, Infront Sports and Media, the Swiss-based company which holds and manages media marketing rights for major international sports events and organizations including the World Cup, which is also an important long-term partner of FIFA.²⁰⁷ Always in 2015, Wanda bought a 20% stake in Spanish club Atletico Madrid for EUR 45 million and built the stunning new Wanda Metropolitano stadium. Nonetheless, at the end of 2017, sold the 15% of its share to Quantum Pacific for EUR 45 million, keeping the

²⁰⁵ Tan T.C., Huang H.C., Bairner A., Chen Y.W., *op. cit.*, p. 1453.

²⁰⁶ Sullivan J., Chadwick S., Gow M., “China's Football Dream: Sport, Citizenship, Symbolic Power, and Civic Spaces”, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, Vol. 43 No. 6, 2019, p. 504.

²⁰⁷ “Wanda Group acquires Infront Sports and Media from Bridgepoint”, *infrontsports.com*, 9 Feb. 2015. <https://www.infront.sport/en/news/2015/2/wanda-group-acquires-infront-sports-and-media-from-bridgepoint>

naming rights for the stadium which bought for EUR 10 million per year for five years.²⁰⁸ In 2016, FIFA's newly elected president Gianni Infantino first announced a fifteen-year sponsorship deal with Dalian Wanda. A source close to the deal said that the sponsorship from Wanda would be worth "hundreds of millions of dollars". As Wang Jianlin himself admitted, this was possible only by taking advantage of the many corruption scandals that damaged FIFA in those years, which caused a deep financial crisis in the organization as well as a lack of sponsors. All these investments are increasing the Chinese power in international football panorama, as Xi Jinping hoped, and FIFA as well appears to be in thrall to China at the moment. Wang Jianlin added: "If more Chinese brother companies become FIFA sponsors like Wanda, we will join forces to advance the interests of China soccer". In 2018, after selling its stake in Atletico Madrid, Dalian Wanda Group bought back the Dalian Yifang F.C., returning where its business with football began.²⁰⁹

Another important owner and investor of Chinese football is Xu Jiayin (许家印, *Xǔ Jiāyìn*), board chairperson of the Evergrande Real Estate Group. He bought the Guangzhou club in 2010 following its demotion in China League One for match-fixing. Xu's investment quickly paid off on the pitch: in 2011, the team was promoted in CSL and since then has gone on to win seven consecutive titles and two AFC Champions League. It paid off financially too, in fact in 2014 Xu sold the 50% of his stakes to Alibaba Group for USD 192 million, many times his original investment. Guangzhou Evergrande Taobao F.C., this is the new name after this deal, was, and still is, the most successful and lucrative club in the CSL. For this reason Jack Ma, CEO of Alibaba, after the deal declared: "We're not investing in football, we're investing in entertainment".²¹⁰ Furthermore, Xu worked with Real Madrid F.C. in Spain to build the Evergrande Football School and assured RMB 100 million per year to youth football development over ten years, with part of the donation being used to fund talented young people in difficult financial conditions.²¹¹ On the other hand, Alibaba Group has signed a deal to sponsor

²⁰⁸ "Wanda in uscita dall' Atletico Madrid: le sue azioni a Quantum Pacific per 50 milioni", *calcioefinanza.it*, 14 Feb 2018. [calcioefinanza.it/2018/02/14/wanda-esce-dallatletico-madrid-azioni-quantum-pacific/](https://www.calcioefinanza.it/2018/02/14/wanda-esce-dallatletico-madrid-azioni-quantum-pacific/)

²⁰⁹ "FIFA scandal was China's chance, says top sponsor", *Reuters*, 21 Mar. 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-soccer-fifa-china-wanda-idUSKCN0WN0Q3>

²¹⁰ Carsten P., "Alibaba buys half of Chinese soccer club for \$192 million", *Reuters*, 5 Jun. 2014. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-alibaba-group-evergrande-football/alibaba-buys-half-of-chinese-soccer-club-for-192-million-idUSKBN0EG1E220140605>

²¹¹ Sullivan J., "Xi's Soccer Dream: Defining characteristics, unintended consequences", 2017, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

the next six Olympic Games. The group will also provide technology services to the games organizers, and will establish the Olympic Channel, a new digital television service intended to promote the games to younger sports fans. In addition, in 2017 Alibaba Group signed a partnership deal with FIFA for its cloud computing arm Alibaba Cloud to become one of its major sponsors for the FIFA Club World Cup until 2022.²¹²

Evergrande is not the only real estate company owning a football club in the CSL. China Fortune Land Development and R&F invested in Hebei and Guangzhou football clubs, respectively. These companies have benefited from local government concessions of land for the development of football and related entertainment facilities. Since urban land is a valuable commodity, buying a football club can be a significant equity investment and can generate symbolic capital through involvement in state-approved projects. In addition, it can grant also political approval, with municipal and provincial governments eager to demonstrate their commitment to implementing Xi's football development plans.²¹³

Another important investment was made by Sinobo Land Corporation, which purchased in 2017 a 64% majority stake of Beijing Guoan from the state-owned investment company CITIC for the amount of USD 512 million. Beijing Guoan has always been one of the most popular clubs in China, moreover, the club has always had a huge support from the government, for this reason Sinobo entry in the majority stake of the club was a significant event. The club has been in a state of decline since the turn of the decade as a consequence of huge financial resources that have been poured into several rival clubs, but after the acquisition its value reached USD 800 million, the same as Italian giant A.C. Milan. Although at first the on-field results were poor and the skepticism of fans led to massive protests against the new ownership group guilty of having no comprehension of football or how to run a club, in 2018 Sinobo brought back a trophy in Beijing, the CSL Cup, which was missing since the CSL title won in 2009. However, it still remains unclear what the precise nature of relations are, or have been, between CITIC, Sinobo and the Chinese government.²¹⁴

Another issue that assumed relevance recently is the double club ownership. On the premise that this is not only a China-related issue, there are many cases in China which

²¹² Leite Júnior E.F., Rodrigues C., *op. cit.*, p. 118.

²¹³ Sullivan J., Chadwick S., Gow M., *op. cit.*, p. 506.

²¹⁴ Watanabe N. and Soebbing B., "Beijing Guoan: New owners, declining fortunes" in Sullivan J. (ed. by), *China's Football Dream*, University of Nottingham Press, Nottingham, 2018, pp. 185-187.

raised questions about conflicts of interest recently: Zhang Jindong (张近东, *Zhāng Jīndōng*) is the president of Suning, a Chinese electrical retailer, who owns both F.C. Inter in Italy and Jiangsu Suning in China; Jiang Lizhang (蒋立章, *Jiǎng Lìzhāng*) owns Spain's Granada and Chongqing Lifan in China, besides he also owned a 30% stake in Italy's Parma Calcio. Authorities have been slow to control these multiple ownerships and the resulting conflicts of interest. In some parts of the world, there are clear club ownership rules. In England, for instance, an investor with more than a 10% ownership stake in one club cannot own more than 9,9% of another. Under UEFA rules, an investor cannot own a controlling stake in two teams which qualify for the same competition. Globally, on the other hand, the rules are neither developed nor as rigorously enforced. There are suspicions that outward Chinese investments in overseas clubs are sometimes heavily linked to the state, particularly given President Xi stated ambition to turn China into a football world class competitor. This raises a bigger concern about multiple ownership and conflicts of interest. Reliable reports indicate that the English Premier League has hired investigators to examine China's acquisitions in English clubs for connections to the government. The FIFA should intervene in these ambiguous situations, but, as explained above, given the financial implications between the governing body and China, it seems that FIFA is turning a blind eye. Standards of governance within China are often opaque, an issue exacerbated when the state is involved, and the country's investors are moving capital across international boundaries.²¹⁵ Governmental interferences in China's economy can be explained with the words of Scott Kennedy, director of the Project on Chinese Business and Political Economy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies: «Chinese bureaucrats believe that they have the right to intervene in their country's economy whenever they want, not only to promote certain industries but also to prevent sudden downturns and reduce volatility. Officials believe that they don't have to defend or explain their decisions in real time to market participants. In fact, being opaque preserves their discretion to make changes on the fly».²¹⁶ Governmental influence is not only a matter of outward investments. In fact, all the investments in football made by Wang, Xu, and all the other entrepreneurs, are partly made to curry favor with Xi Jinping. Certainly, there are also more strategic incentives

²¹⁵ Chadwick S., "Is China on a collision course with world football's governing body?" in Sullivan J. (ed. by), *China's Football Dream*, University of Nottingham Press, Nottingham, 2018, pp. 49-51.

²¹⁶ Kennedy S., "Stop China's Market Manipulations", *The New York Times*, 18 Jan. 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/18/opinion/stop-chinas-market-manipulations.html?_r=1

related to the investors' own profit, such as facilitating the acquisition of land for development and integrating football into existing entertainment, as the above-mentioned real estate industry and other commercial businesses. De facto, while the Chinese government prioritizes development of the national team, investors and owners have their own ambitions.²¹⁷

One of the consequences of this era of massive investments in football is that clubs' spending on transfer fees and wages has rapidly become out of control. Nevertheless, it is not just privately owned clubs that have been involved in this spending fever: as a matter of fact, the two most expensive transfers in CSL history, the Brazil internationals Hulk and Oscar, have been made by the Shanghai SIPG, owned by Shanghai International Port Group which is majority owned by the Shanghai government.²¹⁸ To curb the spending spree, in 2017 the CFA introduced new important rules. First of all, in January, the association mandated clubs to field a Chinese player under the age of 23. This rule was introduced to improve the quality of national young football players, giving them the opportunity to accumulate more playing time, but after the first match it was already clear that there was a shortcut to avoid this rule: the Liaoning coach subbed off his U23 player after just 15 minutes. When the CFA understood that the new rule was a complete failure, decided to improve it in a drastic way: in April was established that from the following season, the number of U23 players must be equal to the number of foreign players (at the maximum of three) and in the squad list must be included a U21 player from the youth sector.²¹⁹ This amendment as well was bypassed through a shortcut: in the best-case scenario, clubs start with an U23 player, which they employ until the end of the match, while the other two are subbed in in the last five or ten minutes of the match. This means that at least, one U23 player has the chance to play most of the match, while the other two are used with no specific purpose but to comply with the rule. Nevertheless, recently, some extremely odd situations happened. For example, many clubs use to sub off immediately their U23 player and to use the remaining two in the very last minutes. A

²¹⁷ Sullivan J., "Xi's Soccer Dream: Defining characteristics, unintended consequences", 2018, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

²¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

²¹⁹ "Circular on adjusting the policies regarding U23 players' appearance in the Chinese Super League and China League One" ("Guanyu tiaozheng Zhongchao, Zhongjia liansai U23 qiuyuan chuchang zhengce de tongzhi" 《关于调整中超、中甲联赛 U23 球员出场政策的通知》), issued by the Chinese Football Association (Zhongguo zuqiu xiehui 中国足球协会) on April 5, 2017.

famous case is the one of Choi Kang-Hee, head coach of Dalian Yifang, who in April 2019 during the away match won against Shandong Luneng, at minute 91 subbed in the U23 Yang Fangzhi to replace him, after only two minutes, with the third U23, He Yupeng. Although a rule on U23 players is necessary in the Chinese Super League, due to a prevailing hierarchical mentality, the application is completely wrong and generates multiple controversial episodes. Until now this rule failed its main purpose to generate a pool of talent for the future of Chinese football. The only result of this policy, was to increase the salary and the purchase price of U23 players, covered with gold without merits. Another question is what happens when these players turn 24. If they are good enough, they can stay in the team, if not, they become useless and don't have many chances to play.²²⁰

Another important measure was enacted in the summer of 2017, a “Luxury Tax” on the purchase of foreign players. It is a 100% tax for football clubs spending more than RMB 45 million (around EUR 6 million) per player in signing foreign players, and a RMB 20 million (around EUR 2.5 million) per player in signing domestic players. This means that if a club spends more than RMB 45 million (or RMB 20 million in the case of Chinese players) it must pour an equal amount into the Chinese Football Development Fund. On the other hand, if a club spends less than this amount, it has to invest an equal amount into the club's youth sector. Basically, transfer fees doubled in every case. Moreover, all clubs should spend no less than 15% of its overall expenditure on youth players training. Many CSL football clubs are backed by rich companies, so theoretically they could still afford expensive transfers, but more than the restriction itself, it is the unequivocal message from the authorities that clubs need to control their expenditures to stop their spending spree. Naturally, the government wants Chinese clubs, as well as the CSL, to be successful, but it's not on the top of its priorities. Prime among all priorities there is for the Party to stay in control and avoid anything that might cause social contradictions. Therefore, the new challenge for clubs is scouting mid-level players for fees under the limit of the CFA's threshold and keep the actual superstars happy and willing to remain in China.²²¹ Chinese clubs tried to find loopholes to bypass these regulations. Some clubs offer foreign players huge sponsorship fees for products of their

²²⁰ Gineprini N., “Chinese Super League: the U23 rule is still a joke”, *All Asian Football*, 14 May 2019. <https://www.allasianfootball.com/2019/05/14/chinese-super-league-the-u23-rule-is-still-a-joke/>

²²¹ Sullivan J., “No more ‘superstars’ for CSL, and that's a good thing”, in Sullivan J. (ed. by), *China's Football Dream*, University of Nottingham Press, Nottingham, 2018, pp. 26-28.

owners' companies, which are not considered as club expenditure; other clubs pay third party companies to make buyouts of certain foreign players in order to make them join the clubs as free agents. In most of the cases, both the clubs maneuvers and the CFA response are not clear, hence it is difficult to know the truth about the events.²²² In the last years, the cases that most drew the attention of the media are the transfers of Cédric Bakambu from Villareal to Beijing Guoan, and of Yannick Carrasco and Nicolás Gaitán from Atlético Madrid to Dalian Yifang. Bakambu, while playing for Villareal, had a release clause of EUR 40 million in his contract. Beijing Guoan didn't want to pay the clause to free him from his contract and then an additional EUR 40 million into the CFA's fund, for this reason they tried to use a gimmick. They invented a loophole under which a third party or the player himself, according to different reports, paid the clause to Villareal releasing Bakambu from his contract and turning him into a free agent. Guoan then tried to sign him on a free transfer. At this point, the CFA then released further clarifications to the policy, with one point unambiguously intended to address Bakambu's situation, stating that any fees paid to activate a release clause will be counted as part of the transfer fee, regardless of who pays the fee. When Bakambu was finally presented in front of the media, the club insisted they had paid the entire transfer tax, but would not reveal the exact amount, saying it was a secret. This answer raised many doubts, because if the club paid the full tax there was no reason to keep it secret, but if the club had been given a discount by the CFA, it was in the interests of both parties to keep it quiet. Reports from sources close to the player – which had no interest in keep this whole situation secret – declared that the club obtained a 15% discount on the tax from the CFA. The fact that Beijing Guoan only paid 85% of the tax means that the CFA created a precedent and will have a very hard time convincing other clubs to pay the tax in full. Speaking of the Carrasco and Gaitán's transfer, the situation is equally ambiguous. According to Transfermarkt, the transfer was worth a combined value of EUR 48 million of which EUR 30 million were spent only for Carrasco. This amount was suspiciously below market price, considering that in the previous summer transfer window The Sun reported that Atlético turned down an offer of EUR 60 million for Carrasco from Bayern Munich and that he had a release clause of nearly EUR 100 million. The situation gets odder if we consider that Wang Jianlin, owner of Wanda Group and of Dalian Yifang football club, sold its 15% stake in Atlético Madrid for EUR 455 million just a few weeks before this

²²² Yang S., Bairner A., "Can the Foreign Player Restriction and U-23 Rule improve Chinese football?", in Sullivan J. (ed. by), *China's Football Dream*, University of Nottingham Press, Nottingham, 2018, p. 33.

transfer. The question is what amount did Dalian pay to Atlético for the two players and if the club paid the transfer tax. Reports online have emerged saying that the two players were sent to China as part of the Wanda Group deal. If that is the case, then the club could argue it received the players for free and is not liable for any tax. According to the Dalian Evening News, probably in the club's pocket, the tax has in fact been paid, though what exactly the combined transfer fees were is still unknown.²²³ These confused regulations are once again hindering Chinese football development. For all the progress that has been made in recent years, there remain so many things in Chinese football that need fixing. According to Sport Management professors Newman, Xue and Pu, « [...] football in China seems to be cycling away from the opening-up, or *kai fang*, practices that have defined the sport's ascent in recent years and toward an insular, regulatory, and centralized approach that has often defined the nation's socialist policy and economic structure during the Mao era and beyond».²²⁴

Chinese football clubs, since the earlier years of professionalization, have always asked for an increasing autonomy and independence from the authorities, in particular from the CFA. In the nineties, football clubs were not involved in decision-making and this generated intense conflicts between clubs, who believed they had the right to run the league, and the CFA. With the gradual change of the ownership status, the clubs demanded to be part of the decision-making process. In an attempt to satisfy the clubs requests to give them a higher decisional power, the Sports Ministry launched a reform in 2006 and established the Chinese Super League Company (CSLC), a stock corporation. The CFA held 36% of the company's stock while the sixteen clubs shared the other 64%. The objective of the reform was to invite all the clubs to manage the league; however, the CFA continued to have a dominant role in its operations. Thus, the CSLC commercially manages the Super League and all the Super League clubs are shareholders of the company, as well as the CFA. The CSLC is responsible for selling the league's naming rights. In addition, it also takes twenty-four hoarding boards from every club for collective commercial sales. In terms of distribution, the revenue generated through the CSLC (excluding its administrative costs) is shared by the 17 shareholders. The CFA takes 10%

²²³ Dreyer M., "Taxing debates blight Chinese football", *China Sports Insider*, 3 Mar. 2018, <http://chinasportsinsider.com/2018/03/03/taxing-debates-blight-chinese-football/>

²²⁴ Newman J.I., Xue H.H., Pu H.Z., "A Back-pass to Mao? Regulating Post-Socialist Football in China", in Sullivan J. (ed. by), *China's Football Dream*, University of Nottingham Press, Nottingham, 2018, pp.47-48.

as the maximum and the rest is distributed to all 16 clubs equally. These collective sales demonstrate an established integrity within the league that has not existed in the past. This system is supported by most clubs, especially small clubs, as they are more reliant on centralized management. According to these clubs, this distribution is not a decisive income, but it is an important one for a small club as their local market is not well developed. However, larger clubs or clubs from developed economic regions prefer smaller collective packages and greater flexibility. For instance, clubs want to control the ground hoardings in order to develop regional business models which may work better financially for them. The argument is how many resources the CSLC has taken and how many benefits the clubs can gain through such a mechanism.²²⁵ For these reasons, in October 2019, the new leadership of the CFA announced that a new operating company, composed only of the CSL's 16 clubs, would take control of the league by the end of the year. In its original plan, the move, confirmed by the CFA at a Beijing media conference, would have seen the CFA resigning decision-making powers to the new company.²²⁶ However, the negotiations between the CFA and the clubs have been proceeding at a slow pace, without any substantial progress to report and the discussions have been interrupted due to the pandemic emergency which postponed the beginning of the season. To date the situation is still stalling, and despite the concerning of the clubs, the parties involved reassured that the new entity will be established.²²⁷ When it will enter in force, this new reform will abolish the CSLC, and the CFA will withdraw all its shares in the new entity to free the league from administrative interference in most aspects of its operations, including rules, foreign player policy, salary caps, marketing and broadcasting. The CFA will still oversee major league operations, such as the election of a chairman, and will have the right to veto "critical matters". The objective is to model the CSL's management structure on the English Premier League, which is run by its 20 participating clubs. The decisions regarding the league will be taken at shareholder meetings, where clubs will be invited to propose new rules or amendments, as well as intervene on decisions concerning profit distribution. These measures will give a greater autonomy to the clubs and will be vital in maintaining the owners' enthusiasm for investing in the game, said CFA recently

²²⁵ Liang Y.Y., "The development pattern and a clubs' perspective on football governance in China", *Soccer & Society*, Vol. 15 No. 3, 2014, pp. 434-435.

²²⁶ Sun X.C., "Clubs take control in CSL shuffle", *China Daily*, 17 Oct. 2019. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201910/17/WS5da7f71aa310cf3e35571094.html>

²²⁷ Shi F.T., "Frustration grows as CSL reforms fail to materialize", *China Daily*, 16 Apr. 2020. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202004/16/WS5e97b305a3105d50a3d168f6.html>

elected president Chen Xuyuan (陈戌源, *Chén Xūyuán*), former president of State-owned Shanghai International Port Group. Until now the inconsistent government policies on foreign players, marketing, and youth development, did not bring the expected effects and the CSL has not fulfilled investors' expectations regarding revenues, nor has developed a domestic talent pool to facilitate the national programs for major events. As the nation is pursuing its objective of becoming an international football power by 2050, this move has been greeted with enthusiasm since it is seen as a major step in the right direction.²²⁸

2.3.2 Football players management in China: confusing regulations and controversial decisions

The role of the football player in China assumed value after the professionalization, both in terms of recognition and of economic return. Before the reform in 1994, the annual income of football players was very low. Like other skilled professionals, they typically earned less than RMB 1000 (equivalent to the current EUR 130) per year in the eighties; by 1993, the average income was still less than RMB 2000. However, when the new league was launched in 1994, the average yearly income of a Division One A player jumped to between RMB 10,000 and 15,000. The wages kept increasing and by the new millennium, the average annual incomes of football players had increased to an average of RMB 500.000-600.000, with some of the top players earning between RMB 1 million and 5 million per year. In those years, football players' salaries were widely criticized. Most of the fans believed that Chinese football players did not deserve such a high income since their level of performance was so poor compared with professional players in Japan, South Korea and Europe. Many argued that Chinese football was corrupted by money. The CFA intervened and in 1996 introduced for the first time in Chinese football history several new regulations to try to limit the salary of players and coaches. However, the clubs chose to ignore these regulations.²²⁹ In recent years, due to the rapid economic growth of China, football players' wages as well increased exponentially. Furthermore, the increasing acquisition of foreign players contributed to exasperate this situation. At first, foreign players in China were mainly low-level players or good players at the end

²²⁸ Sun X.C., *op. cit.*

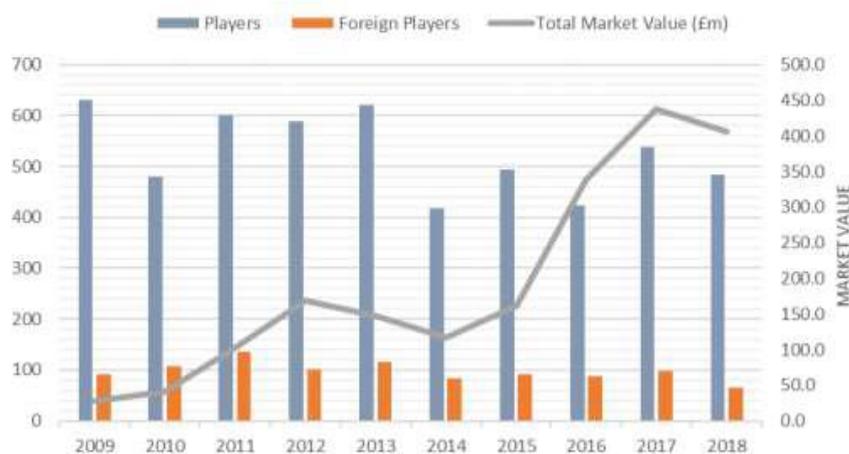
²²⁹ Fan H., Lu Z.X., 2013, *op. cit.*, pp. 1644-1645.

of their career. Over the years, clubs started to spend huge amounts to attract better players and coaches to the CSL, offering salaries completely out of the market. An example is the transfer of Darío Conca from Fluminense to Guangzhou Evergrande in the summer of 2011. The transfer's value was of EUR 8.20 million (source: Transfermarkt) and at the time it was the highest transfer fee ever paid in Chinese football history. However, what surprised the public opinion the most was the salary: EUR 10.6 million, fifth highest salary in the world for a football player. To give an idea of the significance of Conca's new salary imagine that the world's two best players at the time, Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, earned respectively EUR 12 and 11 million.²³⁰ It can be said that this transfer marked the beginning of the Chinese clubs' spending spree, though the amount spent increased exponentially between 2014 and 2018. The total market value of all CSL players in 2011 season was just EUR 30.35 million. However, after the winter market session of 2018, which concluded two years of spending carnival, the combined value of all players in CSL rose to over EUR 454 million, more than fifteen times higher in just seven years. In March 2020, the total market value of all CSL players was EUR 399.98 million.²³¹

Figure 1 Number of players in CSL and total market value: 2009-2018. (source: Transfermarkt)

²³⁰ Pagliara M., "Conca trova l'oro in Cina - Triennale da 10,6 milioni", *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, 2 Jul. 2011. <https://www.gazzetta.it/Calcio/Calciomercato/02-07-2011/conca-trova-oro-cina-801847087562.shtml>

²³¹ Chinese Super League – Club market value, *Transfermarkt*. [transfermarkt.com/chinese-super-league/marktwerteverein/wettbewerb/CSL](https://www.transfermarkt.com/chinese-super-league/marktwerteverein/wettbewerb/CSL)



After the purchase of Conca, Chinese clubs changed their earlier strategy of acquiring fading stars or obscure talents, and started to recruit world-class players at the top of their careers from European leagues, such as Oscar, Hulk or Jackson Martínez, or promising players from South-American leagues, such as Elkeson or Ricardo Goulart, who in the years became legends of the CSL and recently even obtained the Chinese passport. As we can see from Table 2, the top 15 transfer records of Chinese football history were all made in the last five years, underlining the efforts made by Chinese clubs to improve the CSL’s competitive level. Interesting to notice are also the facts that 9 out of the 15 top transfers, including 4 in the top 5, were made before the 100% Luxury Tax, and that only one out of 15 transfers involved a domestic player.²³² As transfer fees increased, players’ salaries increased at the same rate. If, as we mentioned above, at the beginning of the new millennium the highest salary was around RMB 5 million per year (equivalent to the current EUR 645.000), nowadays the highest salary is RMB 186 million (EUR 24 million) earned by Shanghai SIPG Brazilian midfielder Oscar, approximately 40 times higher. Oscar’s salary is not an exception among these astonishing numbers. The second highest salary is EUR 19 million and it is always earned by a Shanghai SIPG player, Brazilian winger Hulk, and the last ranked in the top ten, Beijing Guoan’s former striker Burak Yilmaz, earned EUR 9 million per year (reporting date: March 2018).²³³ To stop this spending spree, along with the 2017 U23 rule and the Luxury Tax discussed in the

²³² “Chinese Super League – Transfer Records”, *Transkermarkt*. <https://www.transfermarkt.com/chinese-super-league/transferrekorde/wettbewerb/CSL>

²³³ “Highest paid football players in Chinese Super League 2018”, *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/256331/average-player-earnings-chinese-super-league-soccer/#statisticContainer>

previous paragraph, at the end of 2019 the CFA released an important notice regarding new policies for the upcoming 2020 season called “Policy adjustment for the 2020 season of the professional leagues” (中国足球协会关于 2020 赛季职业联赛政策调整的通知, *Zhōngguó zúqiú xiéhuì guānyú 2020 sàijì zhíyè liánsài zhèngcè tiáozhěng de tōngzhī*). Among the new policies implemented, the most important is the new salary cap for CSL players. According to the notice, the salary cap will be different for domestic and foreign players, besides domestic players selected for the national team will have a salary cap 20% higher than their colleagues. Specifically speaking, the total annual salary before taxes of contracts signed after November 20, 2019, between domestic players and the clubs shall not exceed RMB 10 million (EUR 1.3 million), including incomes from contract signing bonus, image rights, real estate, cars, stocks and bonds. The annual salary of foreign players instead, shall not exceed EUR 3 million (RMB 24 million). As for the domestic players who are called up by the national team, the annual salary shall not exceed RMB 12 million (EUR 1.5 million). In the end, U21 players annual salary shall not exceed RMB 300.000 (EUR 38.000). In an attempt to avoid possible loopholes, in the circular it is also specified that all commercial contracts signed by players and third parties outside the club shall be confirmed by the CFA.

This means that the player or club shall provide a certificate to the CFA to prove that the commercial contract does not have any involvement with the club or the company it

#	Player	Season	Nationality	Joined	Fee
1	Oscar	16/17	Brazil	 SH SIPG	€60.00m
2	Hulk	16/17	Brazil	 SH SIPG	€55.80m
3	Alex Teixeira	15/16	Brazil	 JS Suning	€50.00m
4	Paulinho	18/19	Brazil	 GZ Evergrande	€42.00m
5	Jackson Martínez	15/16	Colombia	 GZ Evergrande	€42.00m
6	Cédric Bakambu	17/18	DR Congo	 BJ Sinobo Guoan	€40.00m
7	Anthony Modeste	18/19	France	 TJ Tianhai	€29.00m
8	Ramires	15/16	Brazil	 JS Suning	€28.00m
9	Marko Arnautovic	19/20	Austria	 SH SIPG	€25.00m
10	Odion Ighalo	16/17	Nigeria	 CC Yatai	€23.30m
11	Chengdong Zhang	16/17	China	 HB CFFC	€20.44m
12	Marek Hamsik	18/19	Slovakia	 DL Pro	€20.00m
13	Axel Witsel	16/17	Belgium	 TJ Tianhai	€20.00m
14	Talisca	18/19	Brazil	 GZ Evergrande	€19.20m
15	Elkeson	15/16	Brazil China	 SH SIPG	€18.50m

Table 2 Top 15 transfer records of Chinese professional football 1994-2020 (source: Transfermarkt)

represents. On the other side, the CFA shall establish a special committee to determine whether the commercial contract cost is reasonable. If it is unreasonable, the contract

amount will be included in the total remuneration of the player.²³⁴ The new rule changes are supposed to make the league more sustainable and attractive to investors, as well as help push top Chinese players to play abroad. As the salary cap applies to new signings, it is unlikely to be any mass exodus of foreign stars from China. Several Chinese football experts believe the salary cap won't have the impact that Western media is predicting, mainly because Chinese clubs will probably try to evade the rules like they have done in the past. There appear to be several potential loopholes. One is the use of huge performance bonuses which are not included in the salary cap. The use of third parties, like those reportedly used in the Bakambu case, could be another option, but the clause introduced by the CFA in the policy makes it more difficult. A third way could be through the use of a foreign proxy club not too bothered about Financial Fair Play who could sign the player, pay the majority of their salary, then loan them to a club in China. The previous rule changes in the CSL stopped spending from becoming completely out of control, but the league has remained attractive to foreign players. If clubs can find a way around the salary cap, then it is unlikely that foreign players will stop coming to China, but the general trend towards a more sustainable league means that there will probably be fewer big-name transfers to China than there have been in the past.²³⁵ The salary cap won't mean less foreign players in China though; if anything, there will be more foreigners in 2020. Through the new policy adjustment, every super league club can register seven foreign players during the 2020 season, but only six of them will be registered at one time. Moreover, the number of foreign players allowed in the matchday squad increased from four to five per team, although only four can be on the pitch at the same time.²³⁶ Restrictions on foreign players have always been imposed by the CFA since the creation of the professional league. Prior to 2008 clubs were allowed to field maximum three

²³⁴ "Circular of the Chinese Football Association on policy adjustment for the 2020 season of the professional leagues" ("Zhongguo zuqiu xiehui guanyu 2020 sai ji zhi ye lian sai zheng ce tiao zheng de tong zhi" 《中国足球协会关于 2020 赛季职业联赛政策调整的通知》) issued by the Chinese Football Association (Zhongguo zuqiu xiehui 中国足球协会) on December 31, 2019.

²³⁵ Price S., "Chinese Super League Salary Cap Changes Equation of January 2020 Transfer Window", *Forbes*, 1 Jan. 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/steveprice/2020/01/01/chinese-super-league-salary-cap-changes-equation-of-january-2020-transfer-window/#120ddd312d70>

²³⁶ "Circular of the Chinese Football Association on policy adjustment for the 2020 season of the professional leagues" ("Zhongguo zuqiu xiehui guanyu 2020 sai ji zhi ye lian sai zheng ce tiao zheng de tong zhi" 《中国足球协会关于 2020 赛季职业联赛政策调整的通知》) issued by the Chinese Football Association (Zhongguo zuqiu xiehui 中国足球协会) on December 31, 2019.

foreign players, except for the years from 2003 to 2006 in which the number was reduced to two. From to 2009 to 2016 the number of foreign players clubs were allowed to field increased to four, but with the new regulations of 2017 the number was again reduced to five players for the registration and maximum three on the field. The worst fact about this decision is that it was taken by the GAS (confirming that the government interference in Chinese football is still substantial) in the middle of the 2017 winter market window, with the clubs that were already organizing their operations on the basis of the previous regulation. As limiting foreign players, and all the other controversial regulations, has not increased neither the level of the CSL nor the national team performance and in addition decreased also the global interest towards the league, recently the CFA decided to rise again the threshold.²³⁷

The influence of the government in every decision taken is still perceivable and it can be seen also in minor provisions, such as the tattoo ban, namely the prohibition imposed on national teams' players to display their tattoos, under penalty of exclusion. In 2018, during a match against Wales, various Chinese players wore patches to cover visible tattoos, with the contest being shown live on TV around the world. According to reports, the "war on tattoos" is part of a bid to preserve Chinese values and promote a "healthy" culture.²³⁸ Nevertheless, The last straw is the recent move to separate 55 young players from their clubs and throw them into a military-style training camp which is symptomatic of a governance style that could set the country back a decade or more. In a surprise move, on October 8th, 2018, the CFA issued a list of 55 U25 players who had been summoned for a two months long military-style training camp. To make the entire situation more surreal, there is the program the athletes needed to follow. First, the group gathered at the Beijing Sport University where for four days they took physical and psychological tests together with activities and seminars about collectivism. Afterwards, the group moved to Tai'an, Shandong province, for a period of military training with a special forces unit in order to improve discipline and body strength, without performing any football related activity.²³⁹ It is difficult to understand the motivations driving this decision, taken during

²³⁷ Yang S., Bairner A., *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

²³⁸ Richardson A., "Chinese government 'bans tattoos on footballers' — with players forced to cover up ink in friendly loss to Wales", *The Sun*, 26 Mar. 2018.

<https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/football/5896252/chinese-government-bans-tattoos-footballer-wales/>

²³⁹ "Organization of the training camp for the men's national football training team" ("Zhongguo zuqiu xiehui guanyu zuzhi guojia nanzi zuqiu jixundui xunlianying de tongzhi" 《中国足球协会关于组织国家

the regular season, which deprived CSL clubs of its players for the last six league matches and the Chinese FA Cup between Beijing Guoan and Shandong Luneng, which is the biggest contributor to the squad with six players. It is as well unclear which entity has the responsibility for this maneuver. At first, it seemed that the CFA was responsible, but in the days following the publication of the document, CFA officer Wang Dazhao (汪大昭, *Wāng Dàzhāo*) publicly declared that the association had nothing to do with this initiative.²⁴⁰ At this point, it is likely that the training camp was the umpteenth governmental interference work of the GAS and the Sports Ministry. In fact, Sports Minister Gou Zhongwen (苟仲文, *Gǒu Zhòngwén*), previously declared that, in his idea, the mediocre results obtained by the national team were a consequence of the fact that all the players have to play in different clubs. His proposal was to create two national squads that could participate to the CSL and to the China League One or , according to different rumors, in an Eastern Europe league, in this way players could train and play together more often. Naturally, this plan encountered opposition from all football professionals, including the Chinese Football Association headed by Du Zhaocai. Furthermore, in his mind, the GAS should assume the responsibility of supervision and guidance of the CFA, declaring in fact that the government will interfere more and more in football governance.²⁴¹ The most serious part of all this absurd training camp situation is that, according to FIFA's "Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players": «It is not compulsory to release players outside an international window or outside the final competitions included in the international match calendar».²⁴² As national federations are not allowed to take players from the clubs outside the international competitions period without the clubs' authorization, by summoning 55 players in the middle of the season, Chinese authorities clearly violated FIFA's regulations. It is interesting trying to

男子足球集训队训练营的通知》), issued by the Chinese Football Association (Zhongguo zuqiu xiehui 中国足球协会) on October 8, 2018.

²⁴⁰ Gineprini N., "Il calcio cinese sta tornando indietro", *L'Ultimo Uomo*, 12 Dec. 2018. <https://www.ultimouomo.com/cina-calcio-crisi/>

²⁴¹ "Who is leading Chinese football? Is it the General Administration or the Football Association? This is a chess game between 2-3 people!", *kknews.com* – "Zhongguo zuqiu daodi bei shei lingdao? Shi zongju haishi zuxie? Zhe jiu shi 2-3 ren zhijian de boyi" 《中国足球到底被谁领导?是总局还是足协?这就是2-3人之间的博弈!》, *Meiri toutiao 每日头条*, 20 Mar. 2019. <https://kknews.cc/zhsg/sports/bpolzgo.html>

²⁴² "FIFA Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players", issued by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) on March 2020, Annexe 1: Release of players to association teams, p. 38.

understand why FIFA is not intervening. Government interference in the federation's business is usually punished by FIFA with the ban of clubs and national team from all the international competitions, as recently happened to Sierra Leone, Indonesia or Pakistan. China, although already crossed the line more than once, is still unpunished. Behind the different attitude of the football governing body towards China is difficult not to see the conflict of interests generated by the entrance of several Chinese sponsors after the end of Blatter's era, such as Wanda Group, Hisense, Alibaba and many others. This means that if FIFA should decide to suspend the CFA, preventing Chinese national team to qualify to Qatar 2022 World Cup, the governmental authorities may order to Chinese firms to interrupt the sponsorship with FIFA, causing a massive economic crisis. Another reason why FIFA is not intervening is that, differently from the other cases such as Sierra Leone's, the CFA did not file a complaint regarding government interferences.²⁴³ Clubs as well are irritated by this sudden decision. Beijing Guoan Chairman Zhou Jinhui said: "The reason why Chinese soccer has not improved is because of its management. The same mistakes have been repeated over and over and over again. The only way to change that is to change the management methods and [...] to continue to develop the leagues at the top of pyramid to make them more professional and performance-oriented." This is the third time a military-style training is organized in Chinese football: in 1988 in preparation of the 1992 Olympic Games qualification, which failed; and in 2007, to reach the 2010 South Africa World Cup finals, but the experiment failed again. This last provision has been seen by many as the death of Chinese football.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Gineprini N., 12 Dec. 2018, *op. cit.*

²⁴⁴ Shi F.T., "Boot camp to bring out China's best", *China Daily*, 11 Oct. 2018. <http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201810/11/WS5bbea5eaa310eff303281b8d.html>

Chapter 3

The naturalization of foreign players in China

The naturalization of football players has been an epochal turning point for Chinese football history. Naturalization is not part of the Chinese culture as in China there is no large-scale immigration, and its management is strict to the point that the permanent residence of foreigners in China is ironically called the “green card that is the most difficult to apply in the world”.²⁴⁵ Consequently, Chinese football does not have the natural conditions for extensive naturalization of foreigners. As different models for naturalization of football players around the world there are on the one hand, the blood ties naturalization model of France and other countries, which is based on a long history of immigration, which is not possible to replicate in China; on the other hand, the naturalization of league’s players model of countries like Japan is mostly applied when players are in their youth, which is a completely different approach compared to the adult naturalized players of China. Therefore, the identification with the Chinese nation of these athletes may be more difficult than in the above-mentioned countries.²⁴⁶ In fact, China has always been reluctant towards foreign players as can also be seen from the limitations on the number of foreigners in the CSL to give more space to domestic players. Although the country had the opportunity to naturalize the numerous players with Chinese origin around the world, after the naturalization of several badminton players in the sixties, sports authorities have always vetoed this process. However, alongside with the reformation process started in 2015 with the Reform Plan, the authorities started to examine the possibility to naturalize foreign players. After three years, the situation of Chinese football was still struggling to improve, hence in the end of 2018 the authorities decided it was time to finally implement the naturalization of foreign players. In this context, the openness towards naturalization can be seen as the last resort, a short-term

²⁴⁵ Zhao X.O., “Naturalisation of footballers in China: a short history (Part 1)”, *Wild East Football*, 14 Sep. 2019. <https://wildeastfootball.net/2019/09/naturalisation-of-footballers-in-china-a-short-history-part-1/>

²⁴⁶ Miao L., Shi G.S., Lü J.D., “The essential characteristics, logical basis, and implementation strategies of the naturalization of foreign players in Chinese football”, *Journal of Sports Research* – Miao Lü 缪律, Shi Guosheng 史国生, Lü Jidong 吕季东, “Woguo zuqiu guihua waiji qiuyuan de benzhi tezheng, luoji jidian yu shishi celüe” 《我国足球归化外籍球员的本质特征、逻辑基点与实施策略》, *Tiyu xueyanjiu 体育学研究*, No. 5, Oct. 2019, p. 68.

solution to quickly enhance the level of the national team in order to qualify to 2022 World Cup in Qatar.²⁴⁷

3.1 The experimental phase

In the 1950s and 1960s, many overseas Chinese chose to return to their motherland because of political movements abroad, which created an opportunity for the first naturalizations in Chinese sports' history. In fact, in the first generation of badminton world champions, which lasted from 1956 to 1979, players such as Liang Xiaomu (梁小牧, *Liáng Xiǎomù*), Tang Xianhu (汤仙虎, *Tāng Xiānhǔ*) and Wang Wenjiao (王文教, *Wáng Wénjiào*) were an example of this repatriation process as they were all three born in Indonesia to Chinese parents and returned to China in their youth. However these were isolated cases and since then, the naturalization phenomenon has disappeared from Chinese sports mainly due to institutional reasons. Only after 2008 Olympic Games was possible to see again naturalized athletes, from Alex Hua Tian (华天, *Huá Tiān*), an equestrian born in London to a Chinese father and a British mother who represented China in 2008 and 2012 Olympic Games, to the Chinese-American teenagers Eileen Gu (Chinese name: Gu Ailing 谷爱玲, *Gǔ Àilíng*), the first naturalized athlete who won the world ski championship on behalf of China, and figure skating athlete Beverly Zhu (Chinese name: Zhu Yi 朱易, *Zhū Yì*), who are part of the country's "Morning Road" initiative to recruit top athletes leading up to the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing.²⁴⁸

However, only when the topic of naturalization became a main concern for football development its popularity increased and generated numerous debates. Since the 21st century, as analyzed in the previous chapter, Chinese football has undergone a series of reforms, and in the meanwhile many discussions about naturalizing players have been

²⁴⁷ Gineprini N., "Foreigners in the Chinese National Team (first part): the first naturalized, from Yennaris to Elkeson", *All Asian Football*, 8 Oct. 2019. <https://www.allasianfootball.com/en/2019/10/08/gli-stranieri-nella-nazionale-cinese-prima-parte-i-primi-naturalizzati-da-yennaris-a-elkeson/>

²⁴⁸ Zhou X., "Chinese Football Naturalization Survey: Dynamic Mechanism, Realistic Trouble and Solutions", *Journal of Nanjing Sports Institute – Zhou Xin 周鑫*, "Zhongguo zuqiu guihua wenti yanjiu: dongle jizhi, xianshi jiban yu huajie zhidao" 《中国足球归化问题研究：动力机制、现实羁绊与化解之道》, *Nanjing tiyu xueyuan xuebao 南京体育学院学报*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2020, p. 14.

conducted. The first time the government gave voice to the topic of naturalization was in March 2015 when Wan Anpei (万安培, *Wàn Ānpéi*), member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (中国人民政治协商会议全国委员会, *Zhōngguó rénmin zhèngzhì xiéshāng huìyì quánguó wěiyuánhui*), suggested that to revitalize Chinese football it was necessary to introduce high-level naturalized players and amend the Nationality Law of the People's Republic of China. Henceforth, players with Chinese origin such as Chen Jiayu (陈佳裕, *Chén Jiāyù*) started the procedures to acquire Chinese citizenship by renouncing to their native countries passport.²⁴⁹ Chen Jiayu was born in Lisbon in 1993 with the name of Francisco Chen. Chen Jiayu's football career started in the Pescadores, a Portuguese lower league team, and in the 2014 season, Chen Jiayu was bought by the Chinese-owned club Mafra,. When he moved to Mafra, he was asked by the reporters if he was willing to play for the Chinese team in the future. He enthusiastically answered: “Although it seems difficult now, as I was born in Portugal and still do not have a Chinese passport, but if one day I will have the possibility it would be a great honor. I could play for my home country, and make my parents very proud, as they also hope that their son will have this opportunity one day”. In March 2016 it was rumored that Chen Jiayu gave up his Portuguese nationality and successfully applied for a Chinese passport, becoming the first foreign player of Chinese origin to change his nationality. However, Chen Jiayu was not the only Chinese player abroad observed by the Chinese federation in that period. Zhou Dongze (周东泽, *Zhōu Dōngzé*), born in Brazil from Chinese parents, was selected by a Chinese youth national team also if he had Brazilian nationality as the laws allowed this move. The Chinese youth national team also recruited Bernard Sun (Chinese name: Sun Yipeng 孙怡朋, *Sūn Yipéng*) who at the time played for Kaiserslautern. Sun was born in Shanghai in 1999 but when he was 7 years old, he emigrated to Germany with his parents and started his football career there. Among the players who had not yet been summoned by any Chinese national youth team and were still under observation it is important to mention Denny Wang (Chinese name: Wang Yi 王毅, *Wáng Yì*), at the time a Juventus youth team player who had three caps with the Italian U17 team, who expressed his willingness to represent China in the

²⁴⁹ Miao L., Shi G.S., Lü J.D. – Miao Lü 缪律, Shi Guosheng 史国生, Lü Jidong 吕季东, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.

future.²⁵⁰ In this period, naturalization policies were absent in China and the whole process was still in an embryonic phase. Consequently, potential naturalization targets were mainly players who completed naturalization in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, where this process started much earlier than the mainland. In fact, according to the Chinese Constitution, residents of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan are considered as citizens of the People's Republic of China, thus the CFA supported the practice of registering foreign players who have been naturalized as residents of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan to participate in the league as domestic players. However, from 2018, after a new regulation was issued, every Chinese Super League or China League One team could register only one non-naturalized player from Hong Kong, Macau, or Taiwan, who can occupy the domestic transfers quota, all the others will occupy the foreign players quota. According to the Chinese FA, a non-naturalized player refers to someone who was registered for the first time as a professional footballer in one of the three football associations. Furthermore, Hong Kong or Macau players must be of Chinese descent of Hong Kong or Macau permanent resident, and Taiwanese players must be citizens of Taiwan. Nevertheless, both the Chinese players born abroad and the Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan naturalized players were substitutes in their respective clubs, and their strength was similar to domestic players, therefore the value of naturalization was not recognized. The result is that, until the end of 2018, little had been done to implement naturalization on a large scale but a limited scouting work about players abroad with Chinese origin.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ "Portuguese-born player with Chinese origin Chen Jiayu changed his nationality to China becoming the first naturalized player in Chinese football history", *Xinhua Net* – Putaoyaji huayi qiuyuan Chen Jiayu gaiji Zhongguo cheng shishang diyi ren" 《葡萄牙籍华裔球员陈佳裕改籍中国 成史上第一人》, *Xinhua wang 新华网*, 2 Mar. 2016. <https://sports.qq.com/a/20160302/042618.htm>

²⁵¹ Xu W.K., Chen C., Zheng F., "Dilemma and Choice: Legal Analysis of Naturalized Foreign Players in Chinese Football", *Journal of TUS* – Xu Weikang 徐伟康, Chen Chen 陈晨, Zheng Fang 郑芳, "Kunjing yu xuanze: Zhongguo zuqiu guihua waiji qiuyuan de falü fenxi" 《困境与选择：中国足球归化外籍球员的法律分析》, *Tianjin tiyu xueyuan xuebao 天津体育学院学报*, Vol. 34 No. 2, 2019, pp. 122-123.

3.2 The implementation phase of naturalization

3.2.1 The first naturalized players: Nico Yennaris and the other foreign-born players with Chinese origin

In China, the naturalization process in football started in a very difficult moment, as the reform plan launched three years earlier had produced scarce results. Pushed by both the increasing sports globalization and the successful experience of football naturalization in neighboring countries, in the end of 2018 Chinese authorities definitely decided to implement the naturalization of foreign players, putting in practice all the research work carried on in the previous years. On December 20, 2018, Du Zhaocai, deputy director of the General Administration of Sport (GAS) and secretary of the Party Committee of the Football Association, at the summary meeting of the Chinese Professional Football League in Shanghai confirmed for the first time the enforcement of the naturalization strategy. He stated: “In order to actively promote the naturalization of outstanding foreign players, the Football Association will introduce a naturalization policy to assist clubs in the piloting of the naturalization process of high quality foreign players who play in the Chinese Super League”.²⁵² This statement signifies that the naturalization plan had been officially included in the agenda of the senior management of the CFA, and that from the concept stage it had entered the practical operation phase. The piloting phase of naturalization, as declared by Du, was a task assigned to certain CSL clubs. Under the attentive eye of the CFA, clubs with higher management level, more mature youth training system and more international experience in players operation, such as Shandong Luneng, Beijing Guoan, Shanghai Shenhua, and Guangzhou Evergrande were chosen as the first batch of clubs which should pilot the naturalization of foreign players in Chinese football, officially entering in the operational stage. Therefore, Chinese football naturalization model was initially generated by the formula of “CFA leadership + club piloting” (《足协牵头+ 俱乐部试点》, “*zúxié qiāntóu + jùlèbù shìdiǎn*”). Another important issue was to determine which were the targets of naturalization. In compliance with FIFA eligibility rules and Chinese nationality law, the CFA decided to give priority to young players of Chinese descent, and then to consider the possibility to naturalize

²⁵² Miao L., Shi G.S., Lü J.D. – Miao Lü 缪律, Shi Guosheng 史国生, Lü Jidong 吕季东, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

non-Chinese descent players who had lived in China for more than 5 years. This initial selection strategy also shows the intention of Chinese football authorities to make naturalization policies not only for the short-term, but for medium and long-term planning as well, by selecting, as far as possible, potential talents and players who could serve the Chinese national team for a long time.²⁵³ The players selected for this piloting phase of the naturalization were foreign players with Chinese origin such as Beijing Guoan's midfielders John Hou Sæter (Chinese name: Hou Yongyong 侯永永, *Hóu Yǒngyǒng*) and Nico Yennaris (Chinese name: Li Ke 李可, *Lǐ Kě*), Guangzhou Evergrande's defender Tyias Browning (first called with the phonetic translation of his English surname 布朗宁, *Bùlǎngníng*, later took the Chinese name of Jiang Guangtai 蒋光太, *Jiǎng Guāngtài*) and Shanghai Shenhua's midfielder Alexander N'Doumbou (Chinese name: Qian Jiegei 钱杰给, *Qián Jiégěi*). They all met the naturalization condition of the “near relatives of Chinese nationals” section in the Art. 7 of the Chinese Nationality Law. In addition, except for N'Doumbou, they were also eligible to play for the national team according to FIFA eligibility rules as they represented their native countries only at a youth level.²⁵⁴

Hou Sæter, born in Norway in 1998 to a Norwegian father and a Chinese mother, made his debut with Rosenborg's senior team when he was only 16 years and 101 days old, becoming the youngest debutant in the club's history, and represented Norway in every youth national team up to U18. However, the biggest wish of Hou Sæter's mother was that her son could play for the Chinese team one day.²⁵⁵ When the naturalization strategy became concrete, he was purchased by Beijing Guoan in the winter transfer window of 2019 and completed the naturalization procedures by obtaining a provisional identity card on February 12, 2019, becoming the first naturalized player in the Chinese professional leagues after his debut in Chinese FA Super Cup on February 23.²⁵⁶ His teammate Nico Yennaris was born in 1993 in London to a father of Greek Cypriot origin and a mother of Chinese origin, hence he was eligible to represent England, Cyprus and China at

²⁵³ Zhou X. – Zhou Xin 周鑫, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁵⁴ Miao L., Shi G.S., Lü J.D. – Miao Lü 缪律, Shi Guosheng 史国生, Lü Jidong 吕季东, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

²⁵⁵ *Xinhua Net – Xinhua wang 新华网*, 2 Mar. 2016, *op. cit.*

²⁵⁶ “The first naturalized player has arrived! Hou Yongyong is officially naturalized and receives the Beijing identity card”, *NetEase Sports* – “Shouwei guihua qiuyuan dansheng! Hou Yongyong zhengshi ruji ling Beijing shenfenzheng” 《首位归化球员诞生!侯永永正式入籍 领北京身份证》, *Wangyi tiyu 网易体育*, 12 Feb. 2019. <https://sports.163.com/19/0212/22/E7RL6SLC00058780.html#>

international level. Yennaris represented England at U17, U18 and U19 level, but after 2012 he was not selected anymore.²⁵⁷ Consequently, when in January 2019 he moved to Beijing Guoan together with Hou Sæter, like his teammate he decided to apply for the Chinese citizenship, which according to rumors was granted to him at the end of February 2019, just before the start of the CSL.²⁵⁸ In April, during a match against Henan Jianye, Yennaris became the first naturalized player to score in the CSL. “It’s the first in the CSL by a naturalized player so it’s something that I can be proud of. For me, it’s a great honor,” he declared to CCTV after the game. In another interview he said: “I hope to help Chinese football, and hopefully one day I can play for the national team as well and we will try to get to a World Cup”. His wishes came true on May 30 when he was the first naturalized player ever to be called up to the Chinese national team and he even made his debut on June 7 during a friendly match against Philippines. Since that match he became a regular player in the Chinese national team roster.²⁵⁹ The case of Tyias Browning is a little thornier. He was born in Liverpool, England, in 1994 and played in the Everton Academy since he was ten. In his youth was considered one of the best talents of English football and represented England at every juvenile level up to the U21 team for which he was called up in several occasions.²⁶⁰ On February 20, 2019, after a career not up to expectations, he was purchased by Guangzhou Evergrande with the plan of naturalizing him, as his grandfather was Chinese, and register him in the league as a domestic player. However, in the first half of the 2019 season he occupied the foreign quota in the team, earning four caps in the CSL, 8 in the AFC Champions League (ACL), and 1 in the Chinese FA Cup. In July, although the rumors affirmed that he had become a Chinese citizen, he was excluded from the league’s registration list for the second half of the season in favor of Elkeson, who had just been bought back from Shanghai SIPG and who was registered as a foreign player as his naturalization procedures were still ongoing. Consequently, Browning found himself in a unusual situation as he was purchased to be

²⁵⁷ Nico Yennaris, *Transfermarkt*. <https://www.transfermarkt.com/nico-yennaris/profil/spieler/122721>

²⁵⁸ “Nico Yennaris has completed the naturalization process and has become a Chinese citizen. He will go to the CFA for the registration”, *Sohu* - “Li Ke yi wancheng ruji shouxu chengwei Zhongguo gongmin jiang fu zuxie zhuce” 《李可已完成入籍手续成为中国公民 将赴足协注册》, *Sohu 搜狐*, 28 Feb. 2019. https://www.sohu.com/a/298167013_463728

²⁵⁹ White J., “Nico Yennaris makes history as China’s first naturalised player after call-up from Marcello Lippi”, *South China Morning Post*, 30 May 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/sport/football/article/3012431/nico-yennaris-makes-history-chinas-first-naturalised-player-after>

²⁶⁰ Tyias Browning, *Transfermarkt*. <https://www.transfermarkt.com/tyias-browning/profil/spieler/156934>

one of the first-choices of Evergrande's defense but he was only allowed to train with the senior team. Faced with this situation, the hope of both the club and the player was to find an accommodation on loan. However, according to the new regulation for the management of naturalized players formulated by the CFA, players who are still handling naturalization procedures cannot be loaned or transferred to other teams during the season. Therefore, Browning, with great disappointment, spent the second half of the season with the Evergrande reserve team.²⁶¹ In the end of July 2019, a reporter asked Fabio Cannavaro, head coach of Guangzhou Evergrande, what did he know about Browning's situation. He answered in a vaguely manner and said: "At the moment I'm extremely satisfied with the four foreign players registered. If Browning can obtain the Chinese passport it is obviously a great thing, he could be fielded as a domestic player like Yennaris or Delgado and this would be of great help. [...] This player was a naturalized player when he was given to me. If he is considered as a foreign player, he cannot be recruited according to the standards in force. I do not know the specifics of the naturalization process, but I am confident that the club will do its best".²⁶² The reason of this delay in the completion of the naturalization procedures was the difficulty to find the place of origin of his grandfather. In fact, Browning's grandfather died at a young age, and even his mother, who was born in the UK, had never seen him. The materials that proved that he was of Chinese descent were scarce, and consequently was difficult to trace back his roots, which led to a deadlock in his naturalization process. However, the club has always supported Browning to his find roots. In fact, an Evergrande delegation went to the small village of Meige (梅阁村, *Méigé cūn*) in Guangdong province to investigate about Browning's grandfather ancestry. They discovered that Browning's grandfather was indeed a local

²⁶¹ Bai G.H., "Tyias Browning completes the naturalization process and becomes a Chinese citizen, but he's eligibility still has to be verified by FIFA", *GoalChina* – Bai Guohua 白国华, "Bulangning ruji chengong shi Zhongguo gongmin dan nengfou chuchang xu FIFA shenhe" 《布朗宁入籍成功是中国公民 但能否出场需 FIFA 审核》, *Zuqiubao 足球报*, 7 Jul. 2019. <http://sports.sina.com.cn/china/j/2019-07-11/doc-ihytcerm2832271.shtml>

²⁶² Bai G.H., "Goulart may register as a domestic aid next year, Browning has been granted Chinese nationality", *GoalChina* – Bai Guohua 白国华, "Gao Late mingnian huo yi neiyuan shenfen zhuce Bulangning yi huo Zhongguo guoji" 《高拉特明年或以内援身份注册 布朗宁已获中国国籍》, *Zuqiubao 足球报*, 29 Jul. 2019. <https://sports.sina.com.cn/china/j/2019-07-29/doc-ihytcitm5384870.shtml>

and confirmed that his surname was Jiang.²⁶³ In the end, according to the reporter Bai Guohua (白国华, *Bái Guóhuá*), Tyias Browning officially acquired Chinese nationality on September 22, when he finally received his passport, assuming the Chinese name of Jiang Guangtai after his grandfather surname. This means that he will be registered as a domestic player for the upcoming 2020 season, definitely abandoning the reserve team. However, although Browning has acquired Chinese nationality, the possibility play on behalf of the Chinese national team is still pending. According to the reports, the reason is because Browning played official games on behalf of the English U17 and U19 (with the U21 he never made his debut in an official competition), but according to FIFA eligibility rules he can represent China at a senior level also if he played for another national youth team. Browning's legal team is still working to obtain FIFA's approval, but they are confident to have great chances.²⁶⁴ Alexander N'Doumbou was born in 1992 in Gabon to a Gabonese father and a Chinese mother, and spent most of his career in France, with a parenthesis in Belgium and one in Bulgaria before being purchased by Shanghai Shenhua on February 26, 2019, after being tested during the team's training camp in Marbella, Spain. As explained as well in the official presentation announcement made by Shanghai Shenhua at the moment of the acquisition, N'Doumbou's case is particular because he acquired Chinese citizenship in his childhood through his mother but later renounced to it to obtain Gabonese nationality. Therefore, unlike the above mentioned players, he applied for the restoration of Chinese nationality and not for the naturalization process, hence joined the team directly as a Chinese national. However, as N'Doumbou had already represented Gabon in official competitions he is not eligible to play for the Chinese national team.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Bai Y., "Will Browning's naturalization process accelerate?", *Information Times – Bai Yun 白云*, "Bulangning guihua Jincheng jiang jiakuai?" 《布朗宁归化进程将加快?》, *Xinxi shibao 信息时报*, 20 Jun. 2019. https://epaper.xxsb.com/html/content/2019-06/20/content_832749.html

²⁶⁴ "Bai Guohua: Browning has obtained a Chinese passport and changed his name in 'Jiang Guangtai'", *NetEase Sports* – "Bai Guohua: Bulangning yijing qude Zhongguo huzhao gaiming wei 'Jiang Guangtai'" 《白国华:布朗宁已经取得中国护照 改名为“蒋光太”》, *Wangyi tiyu 网易体育*, 24 Sep. 2019.

²⁶⁵ "Alexander N'Doumbou (Qian Jiegei) officially joins Shanghai Greenland Shenhua", *Shanghai Greenland Shenhua F.C. Official Announcement* – "Qian Jiegei – Alisangte Endubu zhengshi jiameng Shanghai Lüdi Shenhua" 《钱杰给·阿里桑特·恩杜布正式加盟上海绿地申花》, *Shanghai Lüdi Shenhua guanfang gonggao 上海绿地申花足球俱乐部官方公告*, 26 Feb. 2019. http://www.shenhuafc.com.cn/news_detail.html?nid=5593

With the implementation of the first naturalizations, the process moved from theoretical exploration to practical operation, and laid a good foundation for the naturalization of non-Chinese players in the later period. In this context, a particular case to analyze is the one of Portuguese-born Pedro Delgado. Delgado, born in 1997, is a very promising attacking midfielder who played for the youth team of Inter Milan and was selected in the Portuguese national youth team at all levels. In August 2018 he was purchased by the Chinese club Shandong Luneng but he could not be fielded as the team already had registered four foreign players.²⁶⁶ In the pre-season of 2019 there were many doubts about his presence in the team for the season because Fellaini, Guedes, Pellè and Gil were the designated players to occupy the foreign quota, and therefore, rumors about his possible naturalization were circulating. At that point, the question was whether Delgado had the requirements for naturalization or not. Starting from the assumption that he could not apply for Chinese citizenship based on the residency condition as, at the beginning of 2019, he had lived in China only for 6 months, Zhu Yi, data scout for the German website Transfermarkt, examined Delgado's ancestry. He proved that neither from the paternal nor the maternal family line Delgado is a Chinese within three generations. He cannot even be a naturalized player from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan because, as mentioned above, in this regard the CFA requires two conditions and Delgado did not comply with any of them: one is that when registering as a professional player for the first time, it is in one of the three associations; and the other is to obtain permanent residency.²⁶⁷ Nevertheless, on the 21 June Shandong Luneng announced that Delgado had officially completed the procedures on June 20 and had become a Chinese citizen. His provisional ID card was exposed as well and it can be seen that he chose as Chinese name the phonetic

²⁶⁶ Niu Z.M., "Luneng has signed a 21-year-old foreign player without possibility for registration, but does not exclude to register him in the future", *Taishan Evening News* – Niu Zhiming 牛志明, "Pu Luneng yiqian 21 sui waiyuan wei booming bupaichu weilai gei ta booming" 《曝鲁能已签 21 岁外援未报名 不排除未来给他报名》, *Taishan wanbao 泰山晚报*, 27 Sep. 2018. sports.sina.com.cn/china/j/2018-09-27/doc-ifxeuwwr8844626.shtml

²⁶⁷ "Delgado following Shandong Luneng to Mount Taishan to pray for blessings could mean that he will join the team as a naturalized player next season", *Sina* – "Shi chui De'erjiaduo sui Shandong Luneng deng Taishan qifu, puxia saiji yi guihua shenfen jiameng" 《实锤德尔加多随山东鲁能登泰山祈福, 曝下赛季以归化身份加盟》, *Xinlang wang 新浪网*, 13 Feb. 2019. https://k.sina.cn/article_6358537997_17aff970d00100fe19.html?from=sports

translation De'erjiaduo (德尔加多, *Dé'ěrjiādūō*).²⁶⁸ At this point, it is likely that Delgado was naturalized on the basis of the Art. 7 point 3) of the Nationality Law of the PRC, which states that a foreigner can acquire the Chinese citizenship if he or she has legitimate reasons, although this reasons have never been specified.²⁶⁹ When and if it will be officially confirmed that he has no Chinese descent, for his debut on June 23, 2019, in a Chinese FA Cup match against Beijing Guoan, he will be formally considered the first naturalized player without Chinese ancestry to play in an official competition in China.²⁷⁰ Speaking about national team, Delgado should be eligible to play for China under Art. 8 of the FIFA Statutes, regarding change of association, as he has not played any competitive game for the senior Portugal side. However, he will be eligible to represent the national team only after having fulfilled FIFA's eligibility requirements in terms of residence expressed in the Art. 7 point d) of the FIFA Statutes, according to which a player without any soil or blood connection to a country has to live continuously for five years in the territory of the relevant association to become eligible for the national team. Consequently, considering that Delgado was loaned out on January 2020 to a Portuguese team and returned to China only on June 30 for the start of the 2020 season, if he will not be transferred again outside of China in the next years he could be eligible to represent the national team only from the summer of 2025, at the age of 28. In this scenario, the value of his naturalization is useful only for the club, which can register him as a domestic player, but not for the national team.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ "Shandong Luneng Taishan Official Announcement" – "Shandong Luneng Taishan zuqiu julebu guanfang gonggao" 《山东鲁能泰山足球俱乐部官方公告》, 21 Jun. 2019. <http://www.lnts.com.cn/newsdetail/420.html>

²⁶⁹ Art. 7, "Nationality Law of the People's Republic of China" ("Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guojifa" 《中华人民共和国国籍法》), enacted by the National People's Congress (Quanguo renmin Daibiaodahui 全国人民代表大会) on September 10, 1980.

²⁷⁰ Pedro Delgado, *Transfermarkt*. <https://www.transfermarkt.com/pedro-delgado/debuets/spieler/258021>

²⁷¹ Art. 7-8, "FIFA Statutes", issued by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), June 2019 edition.

3.2.2 Elkeson and the other naturalized players without Chinese descentance

The case of Elkeson was the one changing definitely Chinese football's history, and partly China's history in general as well. His debut with the national team marked the start of a new era in Chinese football, an era in which finally the openness to the world and to foreigner players will be seen as a benefit and not as a threat. Elkeson's journey towards naturalization started in December 2012, when he was purchased by Guangzhou Evergrande from Brazilian club Botafogo. Elkeson, born in 1989, at the time he moved to China was one of the most interesting strikers of the Brasileirão and had already been called up once by Brazil national team in 2011, without playing. In his first three seasons in Guangzhou he won three CSL, being top scorer of the league for the first two years and best player of the league in 2014, and two AFC Champions League in 2013 and in 2015, scoring in both the finals and leading a Chinese team to win the trophy for the first time. After the first successful years in Guangzhou he was sold to Shanghai SIPG for RMB 132 million (EUR 18.5 million) in order to strengthen the rival team and create a more competitive league. In fact, a club statement said: "For the purpose of supporting Chinese teams to compete in the AFC Champions League, and for national glory, we agreed Elkeson's transfer to Shanghai SIPG club".²⁷² In Shanghai, with his goals, contributed to the victory of the first title ever in the club's history and ended Guangzhou Evergrande's seven year title reign, finalizing the task he was purchased for. Consequently, in the summer of 2019, Guangzhou Evergrande bought him back with the intention of naturalizing him and register him as a domestic player in the next season. To convince him to come back to Guangzhou, the club offered him a substantial pay rise. As in the same transfer market Guangzhou signed also Fernandinho from Chongqing Lifan, who also had the residency requirements to naturalize, there has been speculation that the CFA has forced the sale of Elkeson to allow Guangzhou Evergrande to meet their stated ambition of playing an all-Chinese team through the naturalization of foreign players, which will be discussed in the following paragraph.²⁷³ The rumors about his possible

²⁷² "Announcement about Elkeson's transfer", *Guangzhou Evergrande Taobao F.C. Official Announcement* – "Guanyu qiuyuan Aierkesen zhuanhui gonggao" 《关于球员埃尔克森转会公告》, *Guangzhou Hengda Taobao zuqiu julebu guanfang gonggao* 广州恒大淘宝足球俱乐部官方公告, 26 Jan. 2016. <https://gzfc.evergrande.com/news.aspx?ftid=34322>

²⁷³ White J., "Elkeson joining Guangzhou Evergrande from Shanghai SIPG ahead of naturalisation to play for China", *South China Morning Post*, 4 Jul. 2019.

naturalization started earlier in 2019. During an interview with the *Oriental Sports Daily*, Elkeson declared in this regard: “I saw a lot of fans commenting enthusiastically on Weibo about this matter, of me acquiring Chinese nationality. In my opinion, I have spent a lot of time here, so if someone wants to talk about naturalization, I might consider a formal invitation. If all the conditions are right, then why not? I have a lot of fans here, many people who support me, and if one day I will have to defend the Chinese flag on the field, I will be glad”.²⁷⁴ As mentioned above, in July he was bought back by Guangzhou Evergrande and started the procedures to become a Chinese citizen. On August 20 it was reported that Elkeson had officially acquired Chinese citizenship and changed his name in Ai Kesen (艾克森, *Ài Kèsēn*). In addition his name was also in the 35-man preliminary squad for the World Cup qualifying match against Maldives on September 10 issued on August 21 by the CFA, which makes him the first naturalized without Chinese ancestors to be called up by the national team. Speaking of the motivations that drove him to naturalization, Elkeson declared that, beyond a substantial economic benefit, his dream was to play the World Cup. In the last years, despite his great performances in the CSL, Brazil’s coaches seemed to ignore him. The disappointment of having missed the Brazilian national team repeatedly in the years, as well as the World Cup plans described by Lippi and his staff really touched Elkeson, and persuaded him to become a Chinese citizen. To prove his loyalty to the cause, he is also making an enormous effort to learn Chinese. Although he has lived in China for more than six years, his Chinese level is still inadequate, and thus, since the opportunity of naturalization became concrete, he started taking private lessons in order to be able to communicate with his teammates and to sing the national anthem.²⁷⁵ Elkeson definitely entered history when on September 10 made his debut with the Chinese national team and scored two

<https://www.scmp.com/sport/football/article/3017229/elkeson-joins-guangzhou-evergrande-shanghai-sipg-ahead>

²⁷⁴ “Elkeson: if the conditions are right, I might consider naturalization”, *Oriental Sports Daily* – “Aierkesen: ruguo tiaojian chengshu, yuanyi kaolü chengwei guihua qiuyuan” 《埃尔克森：如果条件成熟，愿意考虑成为归化球员》，*Dongfang tiyu ribao* 东方体育日报，8 Feb. 2019. <https://m.zhibo8.cc/news/web/zuqiu/2019-02-08/5c5c7e65a82ac.htm>

²⁷⁵ Mai S., “[Dialogue with Elkeson] I naturalized to play the World Cup, but I will sing the national anthem out loud”, *Oriental Sports Daily* – Mai Sui 麦穗, “[Duihua Ai Kesen] Ruji jiu shi xiang ti shijiebei, wo yiding hui dasheng chang Zhongguo guoge” 《【对话艾克森】入籍就是想踢世界杯，我一定会大声唱中国国歌》，*Dongfang tiyu ribao* 东方体育日报，23 Aug. 2019. <http://www.osportsmedia.com/pages/News/135098.shtml>

goals during the World Cup qualifying match against Maldives. Afterwards he earned three more caps and scored one more goal during the qualifiers, fact that for now proves the value of naturalization for Chinese football, looking forward to see if this strategy will succeed to qualify China to the World Cup.²⁷⁶

After Elkeson, many other foreign players with no Chinese ancestry were considered for the naturalization based on their period of residence in China. However, the authorities seemed reluctant to implement naturalization on a large scale. During his presentation press conference on August 22, the newly elected CFA chairman Chen Xuyuan, who in the past had already expressed his reservations towards naturalization warning that victories obtained with shortcuts do not last long, once again stated: “The naturalization of players will be strictly controlled and handled consciously. In the future, the naturalized players who will participate in the professional leagues and who will play for the national team will be only a few”. However, he is aware of the effect naturalizations could have for the Chinese team and added: “After I arrived at the CFA, I realized that with the current level of the national team, the chances to reach the finals of the Qatar World Cup are relatively low. If we want to try to reach this goal, the naturalization of one or two core players would increase our possibilities to qualify for the World Cup”. However, Chen Xuyuan ensured that in the future there will never be a situation in which the entire national team is formed by eleven naturalized players. “In the future, naturalized players will not be introduced on a large scale”, he stated.²⁷⁷ Chen Xuyuan was echoed by the vice-director of the GAS Li Jianming (李建明, *Lǐ Jiànmíng*) who said: “We will not consider the eventuality that the Chinese national team relies exclusively on naturalized players, it will still be based on the growth of Chinese local players. It is necessary to introduce some high-level players in specific positions to have appropriate alternatives, which may be more suitable for the development of Chinese football, and it is also in line with the expectations of Chinese fans”.²⁷⁸ An example of unsuccessful large scale

²⁷⁶ Elkeson – National Team, Transfermarkt. <https://www.transfermarkt.com/elkeson/nationalmannschaft/spieler/103588>

²⁷⁷ Xu X.F., “Chen Xuyuan: strict control on naturalized players, only a few will play for the national team”, *The Beijing News* – Xu Xiaofan 徐晓帆, “Chen Xuyuan: yange kongzhi guihua qiuyuan, jinru guozu de shi jishaoshu” 《陈戌源：严格控制归化球员，进入国足的是极少数》，*Xinjing bao 新京报*, 23 Aug. 2019. <http://sports.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0823/c22134-31312424.html>

²⁷⁸ Zhang Z.W., “An official of the GAS discusses about naturalized players and bidding for the World Cup”, *Xinhua Sports* – Zhang Zewei 张泽伟, “Guojia tiyu zongju guanyuan tan ‘guihua qiuyuan’ shenban

naturalization that Chinese authorities want to avoid is the one of West Asian teams such as Pakistan, Jordan and Lebanon. These national teams had made a large use of naturalization in the Asian Cup in 2019, but the team's performance was not directly proportional to the scale of naturalized players employed.²⁷⁹

In spite of the official communications, many other players were naturalized afterwards, for a grand total of eleven. Guangzhou Evergrande's Aloísio dos Santos Gonçalves, Ricardo Goulart, Fernandinho and Roberto Siucho, and Beijing Guoan's Alan Carvalho (on loan from Guangzhou Evergrande) were the following naturalized players after Elkeson. Aloísio is a 1988 born striker who moved to China at the beginning of 2014 to play for Shandong Luneng, team with which he won the top scorer title on 2015 with 22 goals scored in 28 games. After a modest career in the CSL and in China League One with different clubs, he was considered for naturalization in the summer of 2019 and completed the procedures later that year, assuming the Chinese name of Luo Guofu (洛国富, *Luò Guófù*). On January 2020, he was purchased by Guangzhou Evergrande in its project of an all-Chinese team but, although he can be registered as a domestic player, it is unlikely he will remain in Guangzhou. Nevertheless, on April 29 he was called up for the first time by coach Li Tie (李铁, *Lǐ Tiě*) for the first training camp after the pandemic emergency, which makes Aloísio the second (and so far the last) naturalized player without Chinese ancestry to be selected by the national team.²⁸⁰ His call has generated many controversies and doubts. If some commenters defended Li Tie's choice, considering Aloísio a better choice than the alternatives, many others pointed out that, although once he was a good player in the CSL, now his physical condition is poor and, in addition, in the last two years he played in China League One, which medium and lower teams have a training level and a game rhythm inadequate for a player whose ambition is to play for the Chinese national team. However, it must be said that after having been contacted by the Evergrande in July last year in order to join the team for the new season, Aloísio began to work hard, his physical condition has improved, and his

shijiebei” 《国家体育总局官员谈“归化球员”和“申办世界杯”》，*Xinhua wang tiyu 新华网体育*, 2 Sep. 2019, http://sports.xinhuanet.com/c/2019-09/02/c_1124952477.htm

²⁷⁹ Miao L., Shi G.S., Lü J.D. – Miao Lü 缪律, Shi Guosheng 史国生, Lü Jidong 吕季东, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

²⁸⁰ “The national football team announced the latest list for the training camp, Evergrande naturalized player Aloísio was selected for the first time”, *The Paper* – “Guozu gongbu zuixin jixun mingdan, Hengda guihua qiuyuan Luo Guofu shouci ruxuan” 《国足公布最新集训名单, 恒大归化球员洛国富首次入选》, *Pengpai xinwen 澎湃新闻*, 29 Apr. 2020. https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_7192621

weight-loss is obvious. Only the results on field can determinate the success or the failure of this choice.²⁸¹ Alan was born in 1989 in Brazil and moved to China after a successful career in Red Bull Salzburg when he was purchased by Guangzhou Evergrande in 2015. In China, although he suffered many serious injuries, he proved his abilities as a striker contributing to Evergrande's successes in these years. In February 2019 he moved to Tianjin Tianhai on loan because Evergrande's foreign quota was all occupied, but the club did not want to lose the property of the player as he is part of their naturalization plan. In May he declared to Chinese media: "If I can have the chance (of becoming a naturalized player), I'd be very grateful. My family loves China very much and I also love this country. We have been here for a long time and what China has offered me has been great. I'm very glad to continue to live in China and play in China".²⁸² In September it was reported that he had renounced to Brazilian nationality to acquire the Chinese one, and informed his teammates that he had become a Chinese citizen with the name of A Lan (阿兰, *Ā Lán*), although he was still waiting for the passport.²⁸³ At the moment Alan is the favorite naturalized player to be the next called up by coach Li Tie as he has already been declared eligible to represent China because he never played at any level an official match with a different national team. In January 2020 theoretically Alan completed the five years of residence in the country required by the FIFA to be eligible for the national team. However, in his first period in Evergrande he suffered a serious injury which forced him to spend some time out of the country, and consequently he will be probably eligible to play for the national team in the summer, when he can play in the front three forwards together with Wu Lei (武磊, *Wǔ Lěi*) and Elkeson.²⁸⁴ Another player who could really

²⁸¹ Song C.L., "Can the 32-year-old 'Bison' still 'eat'? Is Aloísio's strength enough to be selected for the national football team?", *The Paper* – Song Chengliang 宋承良, "32 sui de 'Yeniu' shang neng fan fou? Luo Guofu de shili, zugou ruxuan guozu ma" 《32 岁的“野牛”尚能饭否? 洛国富的实力, 足够入选国足吗》, *Pengpai xinwen 澎湃新闻*, 29 Apr. 2020. https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_7192628

²⁸² Shi F.T., "Alan moves a step closer to checking in for Team China", *China Daily*, 21 Sep. 2019. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201909/21/WS5d857b59a310cf3e3556cb86.html>

²⁸³ Hua M., "Naturalization is complete! Alan has renounced to Brazilian citizenship: I am already Chinese", *NetEase Sports* – Hua Man 花蔓, "Ruji wancheng! A'lan yi tuichu Baxi guoji: wo yijing shi Zhongguo ru le" 《入籍完成!阿兰已退出巴西国籍:我已经是中国人了》, *Wangyi Tiyu 网易体育*, 20 Sep. 2019. <http://sports.163.com/19/0920/08/EPGL0BJI00058780.html>

²⁸⁴ "The actual condition of the 11 naturalized players: Elkeson is the only regular in the national team, the case of Delgado is the oddest", *Sohu* – "11 ming guihua qiuyuan xianzhuang: jin Ai Kesen wenjin guozu

make the difference for the national team is the striker Ricardo Goulart (Chinese name Gao Late 高拉特, *Gāo Lā tè*) who, together with Elkeson, can be considered one of the best players ever in the history of the CSL. Born in Brazil in 1991, after two league titles with Cruzeiro he moved to Guangzhou Evergrande in 2015 for EUR 15 million, which at the time was the highest transfer fee paid by a Chinese club. In 4 seasons he won two times the CSL's player of the year award, one time the top scorer award of the CSL and one time of the AFC Champions League, together with numerous club titles.²⁸⁵ During the winter transfer window of 2019 he was loaned out to Brazilian club Palmeiras, but in May, when the naturalization became a concrete opportunity, he was immediately called back because in order to fulfill the residency condition of five years, a player cannot spend more than 183 days (half a year) out of the country. To convince him to come back seven months earlier, the club offered him a five-year contract extension and a pay rise.²⁸⁶ During the summer he started the procedures to become a Chinese citizen and on December 2019, during an interview with the Brazilian famous media Globo Esporte, he confirmed the completion of his naturalization process: "I have obtained a Chinese passport. I am very excited to play on behalf of the Chinese team in the future and I will work hard to help the Chinese team to qualify for the 2022 World Cup. I am looking forward to meet the requirements to play for the national football as soon as possible. [...] My children were born here and the Chinese people have always been very kind to me which is a relevant factor that motivated me to naturalize". He also expressed his disappointment for being ignored by the Brazilian national team in the past years.²⁸⁷ At the moment he is fully recovering from an injury and is still waiting for the confirmation of the FIFA about his eligibility which should be just a formality as he played only a friendly match with Brazil in 2014, but he is eager to make his debut with the national team. It is likely that he will be selected for the World Cup qualifying matches in

De'erjiaduo zui qipa" 《11 名归化球员现状：仅艾克森稳进国足 德尔加多最奇葩》，*Sohu 搜狐*, 3 Jun. 2020. https://www.sohu.com/a/377996250_463728

²⁸⁵ Ricardo Goulart, *Transfermarkt*. <https://www.transfermarkt.com/ricardo-goulart/profil/spieler/106076>

²⁸⁶ "Brazilian playmaker Goulart to return to China", *Xinhua Net*, 24 May 2019. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/24/c_138085055.htm

²⁸⁷ Sardinha D., "Ricardo Goulart se naturaliza chinês, sonha com Copa e fala sobre passagem pelo Palmeiras", *Globo Esporte*, 18 Dec. 2019. <https://globoesporte.globo.com/sp/vale-do-paraiba-regiao/futebol/noticia/ricardo-goulart-se-naturaliza-chines-sonha-com-copa-e-fala-sobre-passagem-pelo-palmeiras.ghtml>

September and October, and his contribution will be crucial to obtain the qualification.²⁸⁸ The last two players to obtain the Chinese citizenship were Fernandinho and Roberto Siucho which, however, has a Chinese grandfather, hence is not part of the batch of players naturalized according to residency. Fernandinho is a left-winger born in Brazil in 1993 and is the youngest naturalized player among the ones without Chinese ancestry as he moved to China at a very young age. In 2015 in fact he was purchased by Chongqing Lifan where he spent most of his career, until 2019 when he transferred to Guangzhou Evergrande in its plan to form an all-Chinese team thanks to naturalizations. On February 2020 Fernandinho was inserted in the list for the AFC Champions League as a Chinese player with the name of Fei Nanduo (费南多, *Fèi Nánduō*), confirming that he has completed the naturalizations procedures. However, although he has officially completed the process, according to the AFC regulations, he will still be considered as a foreign player in the competition because he does not have the requirements to play for the national team for the time being.²⁸⁹ In the end of June 2020 he completed the five years of continuous residency in China, therefore he is now only waiting for FIFA's confirmation to be selected by the national team.²⁹⁰ Roberto Siucho instead was born in Peru in 1997 and moved to China in January 2019 when he was bought by Guangzhou Evergrande and immediately loaned out to China League One club Shanghai Shenxin. As mentioned above, thanks to his grandfather who is a Guangdong native, he obtained Chinese citizenship in February 2020 and changed his name in Xiao Taotao (萧涛涛, *Xiāo Tāotāo*), assuming his grandfather's original family name.²⁹¹ Regarding the decision

²⁸⁸ "Brazilian-born striker Goulart keen to play for China after being naturalized", *Xinhua Net*, 11 Jun. 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/11/c_139131168.htm

²⁸⁹ "Fernandinho's naturalization is completed, but he will still be considered as foreign player in the competitions", *Sina* – "Feiernanduo guihua Chenggong, reng shi waiyuan shenfen canjia bisai" 《费尔南多归化成功，仍是外援身份参加比赛》，*Xinlang wang 新浪网*, 12 Feb. 2020. https://k.sina.cn/article_7016148290_1a231ed4200100m1zd.html

²⁹⁰ "Five consecutive years! Fernando has met the conditions for naturalization and is only waiting for FIFA review", *Sohu* – "Lianxu juzhu man 5 nian! Fei Nanduo yi fuhe guihua tiaojian zhi deng" 《连续居住满5年！费南多已符合归化条件 只等 FIFA 审核》，*Sohu 搜狐*, 30 Jun. 2020. https://www.sohu.com/a/404968381_463728

²⁹¹ "Evergrande player Roberto Siucho has acquired Chinese nationality and changed his name in Xiao Taotao", *Sohu* – "Pu Hengda guihua qiuyuan Luobote Xiao yi qude Zhongguo guoji gaiming Xiao Taotao" 《曝恒大归化球员罗伯特萧已取得中国国籍 改名萧涛涛》，*Sohu 搜狐*, 13 Feb. 2020. https://www.sohu.com/a/372690458_463728

to renounce to Peruvian nationality, Siucho said: “It is very difficult to make such a choice. This is a long-term plan that I implemented side by side with the club. At the moment, I already have a Chinese passport and my goal is to be able to play, although I cannot be selected by the Chinese national team yet, if there is a chance in the future I will evaluate it”.²⁹² At the moment he is still waiting for FIFA approval, but, although he will get the domestic player status and the approval to play for the national team, due to lack of strength, he is not in Evergrande’s plans for the next season and probably he will have few chances as well in the national team.²⁹³

3.3 The legal foundation of the naturalization process in China and the relevant regulations of the CFA: the PRC Nationality Law, the “Chinese Football Association provisional regulations on the administration of the naturalized players” and the policy adjustment for the upcoming season

First of all, to analyze the legal foundation behind the naturalization process it is important to have a clear comprehension of the FIFA Statutes analyzed in the first chapter of the present thesis. According to the Statutes, the decision to whom give the citizenship is left to the countries’ national laws. Consequently, to analyze the naturalization process in China, it is important to discuss the relevant parts of the Nationality Law of the People’s Republic of China. In the Art. 3 for example, it is specified that the PRC does not allow Chinese citizens to hold dual nationality, hence whoever desires to apply for Chinese citizenship must renounce to the original one. Art. 5 states that any person born abroad whose at least one parent is a Chinese national shall have Chinese nationality. But a

²⁹² Qiao M., “Xiao Taotao: renounce to the Peruvian nationality was hard. I already have Chinese passport but I’m still not eligible for the national team”, *NetEase Sports* – Qiao Mai 乔麦, “Xiao Taotao: fangqi Bilu guoji hen jiannan you Zhongguo huzhao hai mei jin guozu” 《萧涛涛:放弃秘鲁国籍很艰难 有中国护照还没进国足》, *Wangyi tiyu 网易体育*, 9 Mar. 2020. <https://sports.163.com/20/0309/12/F79CEUQ300058780.html>

²⁹³ “The actual condition of the 11 naturalized players: Elkeson is the only regular in the national team, the case of Delgado is the oddest” - “11 ming guihua qiuyuan xianzhuang: jin Ai Kesen wenjin guozu De’erjiaduo zui qipa” 《11名归化球员现状：仅艾克森稳进国足 德尔加多最奇葩》, *op. cit.*

person whose at least one parent is a Chinese national and has settled abroad, and who has acquired foreign nationality at birth shall not have Chinese nationality. The Art. 7 refers directly to the issue of naturalization and establishes that: “foreign nationals or stateless persons who are willing to abide by China's Constitution and laws and who meet one of the following conditions may be naturalized upon approval of their applications: 1) they are near relatives of Chinese nationals; 2) they have settled in China; 3) they have other legitimate reasons. In the Art. 9 it is specified that a Chinese citizen who has settled abroad and voluntarily decided to acquire a new nationality, automatically loses Chinese citizenship. In order to give the chance to acquire Chinese citizenship to their descendants, many Chinese who have settled abroad decide to keep their Chinese citizenship. In this regard, in the Art. 14. it is clarified that whoever wish to acquire, renounce, or restore Chinese nationality, with the exception of the cases provided for in Article 9, shall go through the formalities of application.²⁹⁴

With the implementation of the first naturalizations, a regulation became essential. On March 28, 2019, in order to improve the regulation on the transfer, registration and participation in competitions as well as the administration of naturalized players, was published by the CFA the first policy ever regarding naturalization in Chinese football called the “Chinese Football Association provisional regulations on the administration of the naturalized players” (《中国足球协会入籍球员管理暂行规定》, *Zhōngguó zúqiú xiéhuì rùjī qiúyuán guǎnlǐ zàn xíng guīdìng*). In the Art. 2 of the regulations it is specified that these regulations apply to both players whose naturalization process is completed or is still ongoing. In the section dedicated to the transfer of naturalized players (Art. 4-8) is specified that a player who still has not obtained the passport of the PRC, will handle the procedures with his original nationality whether he is registered in the CFA or in another football association. Of remarkable interest is the Art. 8 which states that during the season in which a player is handling or has completed the procedures to obtain Chinese citizenship, he cannot be transferred or be loaned out to another domestic club nor come back to a domestic club after he has been transferred or loaned out to a foreign club. This article of the regulation was enforced in the case of Browning analyzed above and costed the player six months with the reserve team waiting for the naturalization procedures to be completed. The third section (Art. 9-13) and fourth section (Art. 14-19) of the

²⁹⁴ “Nationality Law of the People's Republic of China” (“Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guojifa” 《中华人民共和国国籍法》), enacted by the National People’s Congress (Quanguo renmin Daibiaodahui 全国人民代表大会) on September 10, 1980.

regulations deal with the registration and participation to competitions of naturalized players. First of all, the clubs must complete the player naturalization procedures within the registration period and the naturalized player can register to participate in official competitions using only one player status (foreign player or domestic player) which cannot be changed during the season. If a player has completed his procedures and has obtained the PRC passport he counts as a domestic player both for the registration and for the transfer quota. A player has the opportunity to conduct a partial registration as well, and obtain the PRC passport, but afterwards he must make a supplementary registration in any case, in order to obtain the qualifications to participate to the competitions. If the naturalized player completes the registration with his original nationality, he must register with the status of foreign player to participate to official competitions. Furthermore, in the Art. 13 it is specified that, as regards the taxation (such as the 100% Luxury Tax), naturalized players will count as a domestic players, factor that can create many problems when convincing a player to acquire Chinese citizenship. The last section (Art. 20-21) is the most controversial one as it refers to the patriotism of naturalized players. It is said that football clubs which sign such players must cultivate their patriotic feelings and arrange for them to study Chinese, learn about the culture, the country's history, and its situation today. In addition, naturalized footballers must also be able to understand the meaning of the Chinese flag, and sing the national anthem. The Communist Party of China organizations within the clubs must also give them an education about the history and the theories of the party. Art. 21 refers to the control methods that clubs must enforce to such players in every sphere of their lives. It states: "football clubs must appoint professionals responsible to track naturalized players' performance in games and training, as well as their lifestyle and thinking. A written report on these matters will be filed to the association each month".²⁹⁵

In December 2019, after many rumors circulated around possible new regulations around naturalized players the CFA published a note to disprove them. In the statement was specified that, regarding the management of naturalized players, the CFA will formulate relevant policies based on the principles of "cautious advancement and strict restrictions" and that the media reports about a supposed quota of fifty naturalized players

²⁹⁵ "Chinese Football Association provisional regulations on the administration of the naturalized players" ("Zhongguo zuqiu xiehui ruji qiuyuan guangli zanxing guiding" 《中国足球协会入籍球员管理暂行规定》), published by the Chinese Football Association (Zhongguo zuqiu xiehui 中国足球协会) on March 28, 2019.

are completely unfounded. In the end of the note it was announced that an official policy adjustment to promote the healthy development of professional leagues, improve youth training and competition systems will be released soon.²⁹⁶ The policy adjustment for the 2020 season was indeed published at the end of the year, on December 31, 2019. Among others, an important topic, and the first to be discussed, was the registration of naturalized players to the league. Naturalized players will not suffer restrictions as long as they were born in China or one of his biological parents or grandparents was born in China. On the other side, a naturalized player who has been selected for the national team or who has been naturalized for five years or more may also be exempt from the foreign quota. However, clubs can only apply this classification to one player, while the rest will occupy the foreign quota. If a naturalized player does not meet any of these requirements, although he will be registered as a domestic player, he will occupy the foreign player registration quota. This is the case of a player like Delgado, who has neither the requirements to be eligible for the national team, nor has Chinese ancestors. It is also confirmed that the status of a player cannot change during the season.²⁹⁷

It is likely that this new regulation was issued in order to put a brake to Guangzhou Evergrande's plan to form an all-Chinese team through the naturalization of foreign players. In fact, in the past two years, Guangzhou Evergrande Club has helped players like Elkeson, Aloísio, Alan, Goulart, Browning, Fernandinho and Siucho get their Chinese identity cards and to obtain their residence permit in Guangzhou. The club not only closely followed all the relevant procedures for each player, but also helped them to solve their lives personal worries. At the same time, Guangzhou Evergrande, together with the CFA, has been actively helping these naturalized players to obtain the requirements to represent the Chinese national team. It is estimated that this efforts costed a huge amount of nearly RMB 900 million (around EUR 115 million). The suspicion was that Evergrande actively participated to the naturalization process in order to strengthen

²⁹⁶ “Chinese Football Association statement about ‘Policy adjustment for professional leagues’ foreign players and naturalized players” (“Zhongguo zuxie guanyu ‘zhiye liansai waiyuan ji ruji qiuyuan zhengce tiaozheng’ de shengming” 《中国足协关于“职业联赛外援及入籍球员政策调整”的声明》), published by the Chinese Football Association (Zhongguo zuqiu xiehui 中国足球协会) on December 12, 2019.

²⁹⁷ “Circular of the Chinese Football Association on policy adjustment for the 2020 professional leagues” (“Zhongguo zuqiu xiehui guanyu 2020 saiji zhiye liansai zhengce tiaozheng de tongzhi” 《中国足球协会关于 2020 赛季职业联赛政策调整的通知》), issued by the Chinese Football Association (Zhongguo zuqiu xiehui 中国足球协会) on December 31, 2019.

its team in disguised form so as to continue to maintain its dominant position in the country. However, when the CFA promulgated these new restrictions, the club did not complain at all and worked hard to find a new suitable solution for the players who could not be registered, such as Alan's transfer on loan to Beijing Guoan, proving their good intention of naturalizing players to help the country and not only for selfish reasons.²⁹⁸

3.4 The strategy behind the naturalization of foreign players: motivations, characteristics, and future development

In the previous paragraphs, it has been studied the process and the current situation of naturalized football players in China, from the embryonal stage of naturalization to the present moment. However, it is important to take an objective look at the naturalization, neither blindly promote the effectiveness of the naturalization work, nor completely deny the value of naturalized players, in order to implement naturalization more smoothly in the future, and effectively improve the quality and level of naturalization. This chapter will clarify the logic behind the naturalization process, its advantages and disadvantages, and the characteristics of naturalized players, to maximize the value of such players, as well as to “promote the healthy development of Chinese football”, to use an expression dear to Chinese football authorities.

For professional football clubs, the importance of naturalization lays in the fact that naturalized players will be considered as domestic players, hence they will not occupy the foreign players quota, although after the policy adjustment of December 2019, only one naturalized player without Chinese ancestry can be registered as a domestic player as long as he is eligible for the national team. However, for the national team, the value of naturalization is magnified. The objective of naturalization is the improvement of the national team through the immigration of skilled players. In the case of China, where the selection and training system for talents are inadequate, and where there is a lack of strong local players, the implementation of naturalization can be considered as a short-term

²⁹⁸ Zhang Z., “Naturalization, naturalization: the present moment of Chinese football path”, *Guangzhou Daily* – Zhang Zhe 张喆, “Guihua guihua Zhongguo zuqiu luzai jiaoxia” 《归化归化 中国足球路在脚下》, *Guangzhou ribao 广州日报*, 7 May 2020. https://gzdaily.dayoo.com/pc/html/2020-05/07/content_129917_697300.htm

solution which gives an advantage to both the players and the national team. It has been noticed that although the influence and competitiveness of the Chinese Super League have been significantly improving, the national team's performance is still poor. This contrast between the clubs and the national team's performance seem to imply that the club's foreign players contribute is lacking to the national team. Consequently, in order to better prepare to the 2022 World Cup qualifiers, naturalized players are a short-term method to improve the level of the national football team. It is well known that China's main objective is to qualify to the Qatar 2022 World Cup and at this point naturalization seems to be the only way to succeed.²⁹⁹

Speaking about the motivations that drive foreign players to acquire Chinese citizenship, it is undeniable that economic benefits played a vital role. For instance, Elkeson has an annual salary in China of EUR 10 million which is a far-reaching income for a former Brazilian league player who has never played in a top European league. Another important factor is the lack of opportunities to emerge in their native countries. In fact, the highest concentration of talents in the world is mainly in Europe or South America, but many players do not have enough chances to express themselves there. For this reason, these players go to countries where football is less developed to seek for more space, and which attempt to a short-term development by using their skills. The space in the teams is not the only advantage in terms of opportunities. In fact, these players in China have a higher media exposure and found themselves in the limelight more often compared to other players. According to the typical development trajectory of non-European players, their primary destination is usually a European top league, but many players do not have chances to be recruited by a European club during the prime time of their careers due to lack of talent, restrictions on non-EU player status, or inferior level of agents. In the Chinese context instead, they can get more opportunities and exposure, from anonymity they can obtain fame, a social status, and national attention as well as affection and respect of the fans. In the meantime they can as well obtain other economic benefits, such as become advertising endorsements or image ambassadors. The naturalization process in this respect, looks like a natural prosecution of their career, which increases their popularity and makes them symbols of the entire Chinese football movement. In addition, the perspective of playing a World Cup is extremely attractive for

²⁹⁹ Miao L., Shi G.S., Lü J.D. – Miao Lü 缪律, Shi Guosheng 史国生, Lü Jidong 吕季东, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

players who have the requirements for naturalization, as admitted also by Elkeson and Goulart.³⁰⁰

Nevertheless, as also stated by the president of the CFA Chen Xuyuan, it is important to limit the amount of naturalized players. For this reason, while implementing naturalization, it is significant for China to operate consciously and to avoid to be carried by the desire of immediate success, choosing the players who can effectively give a contribution. The targets for naturalization have been players with blood ties, namely foreign-born players with Chinese origin, or players who have lived in China for many years, and who are conform to the requirements. However, the foreign-born players with Chinese descendants number is limited and their quality is mediocre in most cases. For example, among the naturalized players of Chinese origin of this first period, the only one who made it in the national team is Yennaris. For the others the situation is complicated: Hou Saeter and Browning, who are the two most talented players of the batch, are still struggling for a stable position in their clubs, and in addition the English-born defender is still waiting for FIFA's approval to become eligible; N'Doumbou is not eligible for the national team and is a substitute in Shanghai Shenhua; Siucho for now has only played as a substitute in China League One, which is not enough to be taken into consideration. They will have to work hard to prove that they can be a valid addition to the national team, but it must be also said that they are all pretty young. On the other hand, players with no blood ties with China are higher in number and stronger. An example is Elkeson, who is a top player of the best team in the CSL and in the years has already showed his abilities both in the league, of which he is the all-time top scorer with 106 goals, and in the Asian Champions League. In fact, in his first four matches with the national team he has already scored three goals, although his performances against Philippines and Syria have been disappointing. Other players who have completed the naturalization procedures and are waiting for Li Tie's call such as Goulart, Alan or Fernandinho also have the qualities to be selected in the national team and to make the difference. It is important to notice that most of the players who have already completed the naturalization, especially the players without Chinese origin, come from Brazil, are about thirty years old, and play forward. This strategy resembles to the introduction of foreign players in the CSL process. clearly define the positioning of naturalized players, innovate selection and training mechanisms, and build a rational talent echelon. How these players will play in the future and for how long will they be useful for the national team is unknown. The actual naturalized players

³⁰⁰ Zhou X. – Zhou Xin 周鑫, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

are a short-term solution to solve the lack of good players on the front line of the national team. However, in the national team there are several problems in the midfield and in defense as well, and for this reason, it seems more reasonable for the future to target specific players to naturalize. The only defender who has a chance to be a starter in the national team in the near future is Browning, but is not enough.³⁰¹ When Aloísio was called up by Li Tie in the end of April, many commenters raised the question whether it was not the case to naturalize Henan Jianye's 35 years old midfielder Ivo instead. Although Ivo is also over-thirty, with his skills and his experience he could have fixed China's problems in the midfield for the short-term, instead of naturalizing another forward, who in addition has a precarious physical condition.³⁰² The age of this players is also a problem for the long-term project. Although naturalizing high level experienced foreign players can increase immediately the strength of the team and lead to quick results, naturalizing young players with high potential can be foreshadowing for the future of the national team and of the entire Chinese football movement. Among the actual naturalized players, John Hou Saeter is the most interesting youngling but in this phase he is still not strong enough to be selected in the national team. Therefore, considering the professional path of this young naturalized players, it is necessary to create an innovative selection and training mechanism, in order to form a naturalized players' pool with a reasonable age, defined positioning, and balanced strength.

To guarantee a prosperous development of the naturalization process, football authorities must enforce a strict management of naturalized players. In China, naturalization can be implemented only with the guidance of the CFA and the other relevant departments, which can guarantee the fluency and standardization of the procedures to the greatest extent, and establish which direction naturalization has to take. The role of the clubs is to support the association's plans at their best. Consequently, the responsibility of which player to naturalize or which regulations to implement is handled at the high-levels. For this reason, in the future the CFA must reinforce the management of naturalized players, clarify the naturalization methods, guarantee a healthy, stable and long-term development to the naturalization process, and to their best to avoid unreasonable naturalizations only because they are legally practicable. The restrictions for naturalized players without Chinese descentance issued in December 2019 are an important step to avoid loopholes which can cause an imbalance in the strength of

³⁰¹ Miao L., Shi G.S., Lü J.D. – Miao Lü 繆律, Shi Guosheng 史国生, Lü Jidong 吕季东, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

³⁰² Song C.L. – Song Chengliang 宋承良, *op. cit.*

domestic clubs, widen the level of differentiation among clubs, and destroy the fair competition environment.³⁰³

In order to exploit all the value of naturalized players, it is important to balance their relationship with domestic players. A drawback of naturalized players is to reduce the space for domestic players and block the rise of young players. One of the problems to be solved urgently in China's football is how to transform the disadvantages of naturalization into advantages. In this regard, Chinese football authorities, while introducing naturalized players, should give young players full opportunities and space, allowing the best youth players to participate in the senior national team training, to learn from their experience. This move would not only avoid over-reliance on naturalized players, which would put excessive pressure on them, but would also avoid the lack of experience of young domestic players after the veterans retire, and the risk for the team's performances to collapse. For this reason, it is important, besides naturalizing foreign players, to invest more resources in youth football training in China. The improvement of football in any country or region requires solid youth training as the basis. Although China has already implemented the naturalization policy, this solution alone cannot solve all the problems of Chinese football. To this end, the CFA and other relevant departments, while developing naturalization, should pay more attention and give more support to the youth training; while increasing the number of young athletes, increase as well the rate of the ones who succeed, to avoid a shortage of valid domestic players in the future.

³⁰³ Miao L., Shi G.S., Lü J.D. – Miao Lü 缪律, Shi Guosheng 史国生, Lü Jidong 吕季东, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69.

Conclusion

Since its diffusion football has always moved players all over the globe. Today more than ever, when football connects the global and local, with players simultaneously being employees of clubs located in urban areas (often different than their birthplace) and representatives of national teams, players seek for the best opportunities to show their talent. Furthermore, fans identify strongly with both clubs and national teams, and the sport's governing institutions operate at national, continental, and global levels.³⁰⁴ In this extremely globalized panorama that is today's football, in which numerous players have dual citizenship and in which the market logic is an essential factor to evaluate, choosing the right national team to represent can guarantee an important showcase. Naturalization is an important resource not only for football players but for national teams as well, as they can search for the best footballers in a larger pool, especially in countries where the local market is poor of talents. On the other hand, the abuse of the naturalization process has attracted criticism. Many commentators argued that national teams cannot be managed like clubs, and aimed for tighter control in the application of the regulations. Raffaele Poli, for instance, claims that this increasing tendency towards naturalizations of sportsmen and nationality changes, is leading to a progressive denationalization. According to his idea, the progressive disconnection between the geographical origin and residence of sportsmen and the national teams that they represent leads to a de-ethnicization of the nation and deterritorialization of national identity.³⁰⁵

In China, the implementation of naturalization in football has been an historical, as well as unexpected, moment for the country. It a strategy used in other countries for several years, and many winning teams in football history were based on the contribute of naturalized players. However, if Chinese authorities want to implement this strategy in the best way, they do not have to repeat the mistakes caused by the recklessness and the eagerness made in the past years. Reform processes and innovations take time, thus Chinese football cannot wallow in the short-term national team results after naturalization, but should start from the logical basis of naturalization, to clarify the principles, sources,

³⁰⁴ Mercer J., Hague E., "Op-Ed: The Fixity and Fluidity of National Identities in Men's Professional Soccer", *AAG Newsletter*, Vol. 46 No. 11, Dec. 2011, p. 8.

³⁰⁵ Poli R., "The Denationalization of Sport: De-ethnicization of the Nation and Identity Deterritorialization", *Sport in Society*, Vol. 10 No. 4, July 2007, pp. 646-648.

goals, and management of naturalization, and strive to maximize the value of naturalization work for the long-term. At the same time, Chinese football authorities must quickly realize that youth training is the key factor that determines the success of football development. In the future, the relevant departments should establish a more coordinated relationship between naturalization and youth training to promote a systematic advancement of naturalization in Chinese football.³⁰⁶

In order to sustain a healthy development, Chinese football needs planning and stability. The continuous changes and new absurd decisions of these past years are only creating more confusion among clubs and players and the risk is to waste all the progress made in these years following the Reform Plan. By changing the ground rules every year, Chinese football has dragged itself back to the dark ages, to the time when officials were focused on short-term decisions centered around winning promotion to higher government offices. After five years from the reform, the balance is not positive as authorities may have thought and at this point, is extremely hard to imagine the Chinese national team at the top by 2050.³⁰⁷ To June 2020 in fact, China's men national team ranks 76th in the world and 9th in Asia according to FIFA.³⁰⁸

However, also if it is difficult to bridge the gap with the other national teams, does not mean that Chinese football cannot improve and become at least a top team in Asia. In order to create a pool of domestic talents, football needs to become a part of Chinese culture, as it is in Europe or South America, with facilities where children can play built in every Chinese city and village, with football academies present in many schools and with both local and international football matches and news broadcasted in most of the houses and bars.³⁰⁹ Only in this way China will have a chance to create a competitive team in thirty years. China is the most densely populated country in the world, this means that the human resources to create a competitive team in the near future are available inside the country, thus naturalization has to be implemented with criteria and has to be only a small

³⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 69.

³⁰⁷ Dreyer M., "Chinese soccer, with its government meddling, still doesn't get it", *SupChina*, 12 Oct. 2018. <https://supchina.com/2018/10/12/chinese-soccer-with-its-government-meddling-still-doesnt-get-it/>

³⁰⁸ The FIFA/Coca-Cola World Ranking, *FIFA.com*. <https://www.fifa.com/fifa-world-ranking/ranking-table/men/#all>

³⁰⁹ Yan Y.W., "Chinese football against the World Cup's frenzy", *Titan Sports – Yan Yiwei 严益唯*, "Yu shijiebei de kuangre xiangweihe de Zhongguo zuqiu" 《与世界杯的狂热相违和的中国足球》, *Titan zhoubao 体坛周报*, 15 Sep. 2019. <http://ytsports.cn/news-19981.html?wd=%E5%BD%92%E5%8C%96>

part of Chinese football development. Most of the players who will be a part of the national team in 2050 are not born yet, hence there is still time to make a change.

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Appendix

Circular of the Chinese Football Association about the “Chinese Football Association provisional regulations on the administration of the naturalized players”.

To every member of the association and football club:

In order to improve the regulation on the transfer, registration and participation in competitions as well as the services and the administration of naturalized players, we publish for you the present “Chinese Football Association provisional regulations on the administration of the naturalized players”, every unit and interested personnel must carefully study it and refer to it for the implementation.

Chinese Football Association provisional regulations on the administration of the naturalized players

First section

General principles

Article 1

In order to regulate the transfer, the registration and the participation to competitions and other activities of naturalized players, these regulations will be drafted according to: “Chinese nationality law”; “FIFA Statutes”; “Chinese Football Association Statute”; “Chinese Football Association regulations on the management of transfer and identity of players”; “Chinese Football Association regulations on the registration management”.

Article 2

The present regulations are applicable to all the players for whom the naturalization process is still ongoing or is completed (the above-mentioned “naturalized players”). The players who apply for the naturalization should report to the Chinese Football Association and should integrate the application in the unified management.

Article 3

The present regulations standardize the transfer, registration, and participation to competitions as well as the services and the administration of the naturalized players mentioned in the article 2.

Second section

Transfer of naturalized players

Article 4

After obtaining the “naturalization certificate of the People’s Republic of China”, for the citizenship applicant player who has not yet obtained the passport, and is registered in other member associations of FIFA, the international transfer to change club is handled through FIFA’s International Transfer Matching System (ITMS)³¹⁰ and according to the original nationality of the player.

Article 5

After obtaining the “naturalization certificate of the People’s Republic of China”, for the citizenship applicant player who has not yet obtained the passport but is registered in

³¹⁰ The FIFA’s Transfer Matching System (TMS) is an online system that makes international transfers of players between clubs quicker, smoother, and more transparent. Before FIFA’s TMS became available in October 2010, moving players across national borders was a laborious task. Two clubs would agree a deal, the player would sign a contract and then the parties would wait for something called the “International Transfer Certificate” (ITC). To obtain the ITC, the relevant documentation had to be sent to FIFA, who would check it and then send it on to the national association of the buying club. They would then request the player’s registration from the association of the selling club and once this was done, FIFA would be notified and issue the ITC. All documentation had to be sent through faxes or couriers. This method in the past years led to many controversies such as discrepancies in the transfer price, or transferring imaginary players around to move funds across borders for money-laundering purposes. If before to complete a transfer could take days, now if all parties are organized, it takes between seven and ten minutes. The two clubs input the data separately and if the two sets of data are not the same, the transfer is blocked. In this way, it gives the task of sorting out the discrepancy back to the clubs rather than FIFA. In addition, now exists a record of every transfer fee and agent commission in the FIFA TMS database. The system also records the identity of the players and the agents involved, as well as proofs of payment.

www.fifatms.com; Marcotti G., “FIFA’s Transfer Matching System a good step toward accountability”, ESPN, 1 Sep. 2015. <https://global.espn.com/football/blog/marcottis-musings/62/post/2260996/fifa-seek-accountability-in-transfer-market-with-tms-system>

a Chinese Super League or China League One club, the national transfer to change club is handled through the Chinese Football Association informative platform and according to the original nationality of the player.

Article 6

For the citizenship applicant player who obtained both the “naturalization certificate of the People’s Republic of China” and the PRC passport the procedures for national or international transfer are handled as a Chinese citizen.

Article 7

At the time when the citizenship applicant player obtains the “naturalization certificate of the People’s Republic of China”, the procedures for national or international transfer are handled with the original nationality.

Article 8

During the season in which a player is handling or has completed the procedures to obtain the PRC citizenship, he cannot be transferred or be loaned out to another domestic club nor, during that season, come back to a domestic club after he has been transferred or loaned out to a foreign club.

Third section

Registration of naturalized players

Article 9

The football clubs must complete the player naturalization procedures within the registration period.

Article 10

The naturalized player who conforms to the criteria stated in the articles 4 or 5 of the present regulations can conduct a partial registration of the nationality information. If the player obtains the PRC passport after completing the partial registration, according to the article 15 of the present regulations he must conduct a supplementary registration to obtain the qualifications to participate to the competitions. In this case he occupies in the club the domestic player registration and transfer quota for the current season; on the

contrary, if the player is enlisted in the competitions according to the article 16 of the present regulations, he occupies in the club the foreign player registration and transfer quota for the current season.

Article 11

The naturalized player who conforms to the criteria stated in the article 6 of the present regulations, at the time of registration, will be considered to have PRC citizenship. He will occupy the club's domestic player registration and transfer quota for the current season.

Article 12

The naturalized player who conforms to the criteria stated in the article 7 of the present regulations, at the time of registration, will be considered to have his original citizenship. He will occupy the club's foreign player registration and transfer quota for the current season.

Article 13

The naturalized players' payroll within a club must explicate their salary, specifically speaking we refer to the "Chinese Football Association regulations on the supervision of professional clubs' finances".

The "Luxury Tax" and the other expenses regarding naturalized players above-mentioned must be implemented according to Chinese Football Association documents, circulars, and administrative provisions regarding the regulations on domestic players.

Fourth section

The participation to competitions of naturalized players

Article 14

A naturalized player can represent the club in official competitions organized by the Chinese Football Association only after completing the registration; a naturalized player with a partial registration cannot participate in official competitions organized by the Chinese Football Association until the completion of the nationality information.

Article 15

The naturalized player with a partial registration who conforms to the criteria stated in the article 4 or 5 of the present regulations, can conduct a supplementary registration with the status of domestic player and obtain the qualifications to participate to official competitions organized by the Chinese Football Association only after having received the PRC passport.

Article 16

If the naturalized player who conforms to the criteria stated in the article 4, 5 or 7 of the present regulations completes the registration with his original nationality, he must register with the status of foreign player to participate to official competitions organized by the Chinese Football Association.

Article 17

The naturalized player who conforms to the criteria stated in the article 6 of the present regulations, after completing the registration, will be able to participate in official competitions organized by the Chinese Football Association with the status of domestic player.

Article 18

In a season, the naturalized player can register to participate in official competitions organized by the Chinese Football Association using only one player status (foreign player or domestic player); the status cannot be changed during the season.

Article 19

The naturalized player registered with the status of domestic player, when participating in competitions, must follow the documents, circulars and administrative provisions of the Chinese Football Association.

Fifth section

Administration and services of naturalized players

Article 20

Football clubs must give naturalized players an education in Chinese traditional culture, a comprehension of history and on the actual national conditions as well as formulate a

Chinese language study program and cultivate patriotic feelings. Naturalized players must be capable of understanding the meaning of the flag and of singing the national anthem. The Communist Party of China organizations at the basic level of the clubs must give the naturalized players a universal education of history and basic theories of the party.

Article 21

Football clubs must appoint professionals responsible to track naturalized players' performance in games and training, as well as their lifestyle and thinking. A written report on these matters will be filed to the association each month.

Sixth section

Supplementary articles

Article 22

The interpretation of the present regulations is responsibility of the Chinese Football Association.

Article 23

The present legislation will enter into effect from March the 28th 2019.

中国 足球 协会

文 件

足球字〔2019〕266号

中国足球协会关于印发《中国足球协会 入籍球员管理暂行规定》的通知

各会员协会、足球俱乐部：

为进一步规范入籍球员的转会、注册、参赛和后续服务与管理工作，现将《中国足球协会入籍球员管理暂行规定》印发给你们，请各相关单位和人员认真学习并参照执行。



中国足球协会入籍球员管理暂行规定

第一章 总则

第一条 为规范入籍球员转会、注册、参赛等工作，根据《中华人民共和国国籍法》、《国际足联章程》、《中国足球协会章程》、《中国足球协会球员身份与转会管理规定》、《中国足球协会注册管理规定》等，特制定本规定。

第二条 本规定适用于正在办理中华人民共和国国籍入籍手续的或已完成中华人民共和国国籍入籍手续的球员（以上合称“入籍球员”）。申请入籍的球员，应向中国足协进行申报，并纳入统一管理。

第三条 本规定对第二条所述入籍球员的转会、注册、参赛和后续服务与管理进行规范。

第二章 入籍球员的转会

第四条 申请入籍的球员获得《中华人民共和国入籍证书》后，尚未获得中华人民共和国护照，注册在其他国际足联会员协会的，按原国籍身份通过国际足联的国际转会匹配系统（ITMS）办理国际转会至转入俱乐部。

第五条 申请入籍的球员获得《中华人民共和国入籍证

书》后，尚未获得中华人民共和国护照，但已注册在中超或中甲俱乐部的，按原国籍身份通过中国足球协会信息化平台办理国内转会至转入俱乐部。

第六条 申请入籍的球员获得《中华人民共和国入籍证书》且获得中华人民共和国护照的，按中华人民共和国国籍办理国际或国内转会手续。

第七条 申请入籍的球员未获得《中华人民共和国入籍证书》时，以原国籍身份办理国际或国内转会手续至转入俱乐部。

第八条 球员在申请办理中华人民共和国国籍入籍手续或已完成中华人民共和国国籍入籍手续的当赛季内不得转会或租借至国内其他俱乐部，且不得在从国内俱乐部转会或租借至国外俱乐部之后再在当赛季转会或租借至国内俱乐部。

第三章 入籍球员的注册

第九条 俱乐部应在注册期内为入籍球员办理注册手续。

第十条 符合本规定第四条或第五条规定的入籍球员，可对国籍信息进行容缺注册，该球员若在容缺注册完成后获得了中华人民共和国护照并按本规定第十五条进行补报名且取得参赛资格的，则该球员占用俱乐部本赛季国内球员转

会、注册名额；若球员按本规定第十六条报名参赛，则该球员占用俱乐部本赛季外援转会、注册名额。

第十一条 符合本规定第六条的入籍球员，注册时国籍为中华人民共和国，该球员占用俱乐部本赛季国内球员转会、注册名额。

第十二条 符合本规定第七条的入籍球员，注册时国籍为原国籍，该球员占用俱乐部本赛季外援转会、注册名额。

第十三条 入籍球员所属俱乐部的薪酬总额应包含入籍球员的薪酬，具体参照《中国足球协会职业足球俱乐部财务监管规程》执行。

前款入籍球员的引援调节费等其他费用应按中国足球协会相关管理规定、通知、文件中有关国内球员的规定执行。

第四章 入籍球员的参赛

第十四条 入籍球员只有完成注册后，方可代表俱乐部参加中国足球协会举办的正式比赛；进行容缺注册的入籍球员在完成国籍信息的补填前，不得参加中国足球协会举办的正式比赛。

第十五条 符合本规定第四条或第五条进行容缺注册的入籍球员，只有在获得了中华人民共和国护照后，方可以国内球员身份进行补报名并取得参加中国足球协会主办的正

式比赛的资格。

第十六条 符合本规定第四条、第五条或第七条的入籍球员，如以原国籍身份完成注册的，则应以外籍球员身份报名参加中国足球协会主办的正式比赛。

第十七条 符合本规定第六条的入籍球员，注册完成后应以国内球员身份报名参加中国足球协会主办的正式比赛。

第十八条 入籍球员在一个赛季内只能以一种球员身份（外籍球员或国内球员）报名参加中国足球协会主办的正式比赛，赛季中不得更改球员身份。

第十九条 以国内球员身份注册、报名的入籍球员参赛时应按中国足球协会的相关管理规定、通知、文件等执行。

第五章 入籍球员的服务与管理

第二十条 俱乐部应对入籍球员进行中华优秀传统文化教育，了解中国历史和现实国情，制定中文学习计划，培养爱国主义情怀。入籍球员应能识国旗、认国徽、唱国歌。俱乐部所在基层党组织应对入籍球员进行党的历史、基本理论的普及教育。

第二十一条 俱乐部应指定专人负责入籍球员的思想、生活、训练、比赛的状态跟踪，每月向中国足球协会提交书面报告。

第六章 附则

第二十二条 本规定由中国足球协会负责解释。

第二十三条 本规定自 2019 年 3 月 28 日起实施。

(编辑：李鑫)